

A Timeline of Crisis Points for Friends United Meeting, Its Personnel Policy, and Its Theological Diversity: 1988–2008

by Carol Holmes

What follows is my personal understanding, beginning with 1988, of the crisis points in the organization of Friends United Meeting that pertain to the personnel policy and the general board's theological diversity. It is not the product of a committee, but is a personal work offered with the thought that it may help NYYM Friends understand what has been going on in Friends United Meeting in these two areas of testing. I have conferred with both Johan Maurer and Christopher Sammond in preparing it and have incorporated suggestions from them both.

The 1980s

In the late 1980s, challenged by painful events in the Friends United Meeting community—one was the arrest of an individual by the Richmond, Indiana, police for solicitation; another was an instance of someone who showed bad judgment around boundaries—the FUM staff and board began discussing homosexuality.

The first document below gives a brief history of that discussion and its results. (This document was written by Ben Richmond in 2003 to give background to the FUM general board, which was in the process of revisiting the personnel policy as the result of an incident that occurred at the Nairobi Triennial in 2002 [see below].)

Here is Ben Richmond's background paper (as found on New England Yearly Meeting's Web site).

History of FUM policy regarding appointment of homosexuals

Until 1988, Friends United Meeting had not been able to openly discuss or reach a decision regarding its position on homosexual relationships. That year, staff made a decision not to appoint a gay man to the Quaker Volunteer Witness program, and to request that the Board adopt a personnel policy that would give staff guidance on the issue. In response, Friends United Meeting received a flood of letters from individuals and meetings, and staff conducted visits in several member yearly meetings to test possible policy options. Ben Richmond prepared a "Working Paper on Appointment of Homosexuals to QVW" to discuss the issues involved and made recommendations for policy. This paper was circulated to the Board prior to the October 1988 meetings, and in the concluding minute on the subject requested that the paper "be saved as a contextual and historical document." After a preliminary discussion within the World Ministries Commission (which oversaw the QVW program), a revised version of the recommendations from that paper was presented to the General Board.

Board minute 88 GB 52 reflects the thorough and tender discussion of the issues involved. Three paragraphs were separately approved:

- a. We affirm the civil rights of all people to secular employment, housing, education and health care without regard to their sexual orientation. In particular, we condemn violence, whether verbal or physical, against homosexuals, and call for their full protection under the civil rights laws.
- b. We reaffirm our traditional testimonies of peace, simplicity, truth speaking, gender and racial equality, personal integrity, fidelity, chastity and community. We recognize that there is diversity among us on issues of sexuality. For the purpose of our corporate life together, we affirm our traditional testimony that sexual intercourse should be confined to the bonds of marriage, which we understand to be between one man and one woman.
- c. The lifestyle of volunteers under appointment to Quaker Volunteer Witness, regardless of their sexual orientation, should be in accordance with these testimonies.

According to the same minute, the General Board also approved adding the following statement:

These policies are based on Friends beliefs as interpreted by Friends United Meeting since its beginning.

In March 1991, the General Board Executive Committee approved (91 GBEX 18) circulation of an “Organizational and Personnel Policy Manual.” It took the QVW policy and extended it as follows:

Friends United Meeting holds to the traditional Friends testimonies of peace (nonviolence), simplicity, truth speaking, community, gender and racial equality, chastity, and fidelity in marriage. It is expected that the lifestyle of all staff and volunteer appointees of Friends United Meeting will be in accordance with these testimonies.

Friends United Meeting affirms the civil rights of all people. Staff and volunteer appointments are made without regard to sexual orientation. It is expected that sexual intercourse should be confined to marriage, understood to be between one man and one woman.

This wording has been retained in all subsequent editions of the Personnel Manual.

The 1988 minute placed the personnel policy within the framework of traditional Friends testimonies and said that the policy applied to the corporate activities of FUM. The wording of the 1991 Personnel Manual explicitly applied the policy to all staff and volunteer appointees of FUM.

prepared by Ben Richmond, spring 2003

Johan Maurer has written about his memories of being in the room when 88 GB 52 was approved on his blog, *Can You Believe?* In his blog post, he was attempting to speak to the perception that FUM imposed the personnel policy in an authoritarian fashion. What actually happened was that months of consultations and study led to a General Board meeting, clerked humbly and carefully by Paul Enyart, in which a decision was made almost regretfully by a roomful of people practicing mutual submission. Many

people had to give up something desired by their home constituencies, including those Friends who still felt that homosexuality was criminal or should at least be socially disadvantaged. The actual policy goes directly against those points of view, and upholds the civil rights of all people regardless of sexual orientation.

(For those wishing to read more of Johan Maurer's reflections on Friends United Meeting, of which he was general secretary from 1993 to 2000, here is the link to his archive of posts about FUM from January 27, 2005, to November 22, 2007. There are 20 of them: <http://johanpdx.blogspot.com/search/label/fum>.)

The 1990s

After Minute 88 GB 52 was approved in 1988 and after the *Personnel Manual* was adopted by the Executive Committee in 1991, it was recognized by everyone that the board was divided. Indeed, the divisions on the board seemed so great to some that a push for realignment was made between 1990 and 1993 by then-General Secretary Steven Main. This is remembered as "the Realignment Controversy."

Main felt that the dually affiliated yearly meetings—the reunited Orthodox and Hicksite yearly meetings: Canadian, New England, New York, Baltimore, Southeastern—because of their universalism and because of the fact that many members did not identify as Christian, did not belong in FUM and encouraged them to make Friends General Conference their single affiliation.

Realignment failed.

The dual affiliates did not leave. Instead, one singly affiliated yearly meeting left to join Evangelical Friends Alliance (now International); the Western Association was formed to allow Whittier Friends Meeting (Ann Davidson's home meeting) to stay within FUM; Steven Main resigned; and after Harold Smuck's healing interim service Johan Maurer was named general secretary.

(For those wishing to know more about the Realignment Controversy, here is a link to an article by Bill Samuel: www.quakerinfo.com/quakalig.shtml.)

Shaken by the Realignment Controversy that nearly destroyed the organization, the FUM board was able in 1993 to unite around a mission statement that helped to heal and focus it:

Friends United Meeting commits itself to energize and equip Friends through the power of the Holy Spirit to gather people into fellowships where Jesus Christ is known, loved and obeyed as Teacher and Lord.

The Nairobi Triennial, 2002

In 2002, as part of its effort to become equal partners with Friends in Africa, FUM held its first triennial overseas—in Nairobi, Kenya. It was a huge undertaking. No one had ever planned an international triennial before, let alone a triennial in a developing country, and some things went awry. One of them was that too many people were invited to be worship-sharing group facilitators. When General Secretary Retha McCutchen saw that the list of names was too long, one of the facilitators she asked to step aside was the clerk of Baltimore Yearly Meeting, Lamar Matthews. She did so knowing that Lamar was an openly gay man living with his partner—not because she disapproved of this, but

because she believed that this would be difficult for the Kenyan hosts of the triennial to accept.

While Retha and Lamar found personal understanding and reconciliation with each other in Nairobi, it was after the Nairobi triennial in 2002 that calls came forward from Baltimore Yearly Meeting Friends to the FUM board to reconsider the personnel policy.

The New York Yearly Meeting representatives to the FUM general board during this time were Ruth Kinsey of Farmington Friends Meeting, Jens Braun of Old Chatham Meeting, and Carol Holmes, then of 15th Street Meeting, with Ann Davidson attending as president of the United Society of Friends Women International.

The personnel policy was discussed at almost every general board meeting between Fall 2002 and Spring 2005 (when Ben Richmond's background paper, cited above, was used). The board did not find unity to amend the policy or remove it—**but it also did not find unity to reaffirm it**. The board was divided. Stopped. In the face of division, with no clear direction forward, it is Friends' process that whatever has been minuted as approved in the past remains in place. So 88 GB 52 remains standing after three years of discussion by the FUM General Board between 2002 and 2005.

At the Des Moines triennial in 2005, Retha McCutchen spoke of discrimination and of the incident at the Nairobi triennial (although she did not name Lamar). In her speech, she affirmed and upheld the spiritual gifts that God had given the man she had discriminated against. And she named what she did as "discrimination."

Here is the URL for "River Teeth for the Lamb's War," the keynote speech delivered by Retha McCutchen in Des Moines 2005: www.fum.org/about/triennial%202005/keynote.htm. [This link no longer works due to a catastrophic crash of FUM's website—NYYM communications director, December 2015]

Here is the excerpt described above in which Retha speaks of what happened in Nairobi:

There had been 20 plus names listed for possible worship sharing leaders. We only needed 12. I made a decision not to invite a person in a homosexual relationship to be a worship group leader. This was not a policy decision; just something I felt was a courtesy to our hosts. I also asked American women to wear skirts rather than pants, but no one reacted to that!

It was at the Triennial sessions that I discovered this person had already been asked to serve and subsequently had the invitation withdrawn. This is where the pain comes in. Whether you support the decision I made or not, what is important is the pain and humiliation caused a human being through my actions. And that makes my handling of the situation inexcusable.

Upon discovering that the invitation had been extended and then withdrawn, my immediate response was to apologize. Only through the Spirit of God could what I was feeling be honestly transmitted.

What I received in return was a blessing of forgiveness like I've never before experienced. Again, there were no adequate words. This godly man touched my life deeply in a way that removed my feelings of guilt.

Can he work for FUM? No.

Is he being used of God? Yes.

Do I understand all this? Absolutely not!

What I do understand is spirit-to-spirit communication and I'm willing to accept that at face value.

Revelation 22 "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ... On each side of the river stood the tree of life, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

Aftermath of Des Moines, 2005

At Des Moines, Retha McCutchen stunned almost everyone when she announced that she would retire as general secretary of FUM effective February 2006. At the same time, Ben Richmond's retirement from FUM after 20-some years of service was officially celebrated. At Des Moines, FUM lost its two most experienced leaders. In December 2005, a third senior staff member left. For the next year the board was focused intensely on financial and staffing issues, which were both at a crisis point, until Sylvia Graves emerged as an interim general secretary in June 2006. Also in June 2006 the board began an extended strategic planning process, partly to make sure that such crises didn't occur again and partly to help address the tensions of the theologic diversity on the board. This process, which was making progress, was to have large impact when it was transplanted to Kenya at the first-ever joint meeting of the North American and African general boards in February 2007.

The NYYM representatives to the general board for this triennium (July 2005 to July 2008) who took part in the strategic-planning process were Christopher Sammond of Bulls Head Meeting, Richard Goodman of Westbury Meeting, and Carol Holmes, continuing but now of Brooklyn Meeting. (Ann Davidson was no longer president of USFWI but served as an alternate representative, as did Regina Haag of Adirondack Friends Meeting.)

Kenya, February 2007

As part of the continuing effort to achieve equal partnership with its African yearly meeting constituents, the FUM North American board accepted the invitation to a joint meeting with the African board in Kenya in February 2007. Airfares to Kenya run around \$1,000. As a result, only Christopher Sammond went to Kenya on behalf of NYYM.

The report that Christopher Sammond wrote, with the help of Carol Holmes and Richard Goodman, about the challenging events in Kenya has been on the New York Yearly Meeting Web site at www.nyym.org/pubs/FUMRepsReport0704.pdf since it was first presented to Spring Sessions in 2007. We urge Friends to familiarize themselves with it.

This report has been circulated among Friends in several other yearly meetings and has been found helpful to them in understanding what happened in Africa. Two events that occurred in Kenya have had a large impact.

The Sermons of African Pastors

Word traveled among North American Friends quickly about two sermons preached in Africa where North American board members were present. One occurred the first day North American Friends arrived in a Friends Church on Ngong Road. It focused on a

passage from Romans about shame, and NEYM board member Will Taber spoke out against it. Then, at the opening of the FUM board sessions several days later, a Ugandan pastor preached a sermon on Romans 1:18–32 in which a call-and-response of “Praise God” went up from many of the worshipers in response to the acclamation, quoting Romans 1:18–32, that “even those who condone such acts are worthy of death!” The word that spread rapidly on the Internet was that an African FUM pastor preached death to homosexuals and their supporters and that FUM did nothing to repudiate it. In fact, the FUM leadership was disturbed by the sermon, but because FUM is not very adept at using the Internet, word of what was done to repudiate it has not spread as rapidly. Within a few days of the sermon, the pastor was visited by Eden Grace, an FUM staff member in the African Ministries Office in Kisumu from New England Yearly Meeting. In short, he was elated.

In addition, at the October 2007 board meeting in response to a minute from New England Yearly Meeting’s Ministry & Counsel and a letter from Canadian Yearly Meeting, the following minute was approved by the FUM board:

Allegations that Friends United Meeting (FUM) is hostile to homosexuals and their allies, and that FUM condones physical or emotional violence against homosexuals and their allies, have been circulated among Friends and on the Internet.

The General Board of FUM/Richmond, in session this 13th day of 10th month, 2007, is clear that God loves all persons, and that hostility toward any person is not consistent with the Christian Gospel. In particular, this General Board condemns the threat of physical or emotional violence against any person.

The words of the minute are spare on the page. But many of those who were in the meetinghouse at Woolman Hill experienced great power in the room as the clerk presented it. One Friend spoke of fears for his life and visions of machetes as he had listened to the sermon of the Ugandan pastor. Others spoke of the pain of having their lifelong faith attacked. As the clerk read and reread the words of the minute slowly and carefully, almost as *lectio divina*, all were gathered together with heads bowed.

The Reaffirmation of the Richmond Declaration

Another matter of concern coming from the joint Kenyan board meeting was the reaffirmation of the Richmond Declaration that occurred. Although it was an extremely painful experience for dually affiliated Friends who had worked so hard and well together to navigate diversity through the strategic planning process in North America to find themselves shunted aside while the declaration was reaffirmed as a basis for faith, it is clearly minuted that adoption of the Richmond Declaration is not necessary for a yearly meeting to be a member of FUM.

Kenya, January 2008

As of this writing—January 31, 2008—Friends United Meeting is working to stay in contact with Quakers in Kenya in the wake of the violence that erupted following the Kenyan election in December. News reports are that close to 1,000 people have been killed. Those on the ground say the numbers are incalculable. The worst violence has

been in western Kenya, including the city of Kisumu where FUM has its Kenyan headquarters, which has been ravaged by destruction. The nearby Kaimosi Hospital and Friends Theological College seem to have escaped damage so far. But on January 28, the U.S. Embassy evacuated the Graces, with their two young children, to Nairobi. As of this writing, Ben and Jody Richmond remain in the Kaimosi Hospital compound at Friends Theological College with 3,000 Kenyans have come there for refuge. In neighboring Eldoret, the Eldoret Friends Church was sheltering some 62 families.

The African office of Friends United Meeting organized a peace conference in Kakamega over the last weekend in January drawing together 60 Quaker leaders in Kenya. Mary Lord, formerly of the AFSC, who just happened to be in Kenya visiting and vacationing, spoke to Kenyan Friends about the Peace Testimony. Eden Grace wrote a report from the conference that Friends can read here: <http://updatesonkenya.blogspot.com/2008/01/peace-conference-main-speakers-1252008.html>.

(Much more information is available about Kenya on the Internet. Many Quakers—in both Kenya and North America—are posting information on their blogs.)

The January meeting of the African board of FUM was cancelled because of the danger.

FUM has an emergency fund in place to receive contributions earmarked for Kenyan relief.