



A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Two

Fourth Month 1981

Dear Friends,

A Friendly Letter is underway! My sincere thanks to those of you who have subscribed. And if you have not yet subscribed, I hope you will do so and keep it coming to you monthly. (*Subscription rates are \$12 a year for individuals, \$15 a year for groups, payable with your order.*)

As stated in issue Number One, my purpose is to apply journalistic skills to topics of current importance to Friends in America. My special concerns are the development of strong, faithful Quaker witness for peace, human rights and Simplicity, and the promotion of contacts and understanding among the various groups of Friends.

This month I jump into the latter of these concerns, looking at a controversy which is placing stresses on the efforts to build community among the diverse constituencies in American Quakerism. This is a delicate area, but one not much reported on elsewhere, except in retrospect, so I am rushing in where angels fear to tread. If you find yourself strongly moved to comment on my reporting and interpretation, by all means let me hear your reactions, pro or con.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

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P.S. A quick update on last month's topic, the Law of the Sea Treaty: Langley Hill Monthly Meeting in McLean, VA has formed a task force to gather signatures on a petition supporting completion of the treaty. If such an effort appeals to you or your Meeting, write to Save the Sea Treaty at my box number in Baileys Crossroads, and we will send you petitions and further information.

FCNL AND THE IOWA CRITICS: A CHALLENGE TO QUAKER UNITY

The unity of Friends is facing serious strains in Iowa Yearly Meeting (FUM). And the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) is the focus of the trouble. How this conflict is resolved could provide an important test case for the delicate and fragile ecumenical efforts that have been developing among Friends in recent years.

FCNL and the Iowa Critics

Last November, Iowa Yearly Meeting sent delegates to FCNL's Annual Meeting in Washington. Of the seven, four were outspoken conservative Evangelical Christians, who were very upset by much of what they saw and heard there.

Please turn the page.

In January, these four write to all 40-odd Iowa Friends Churches and Meetings, laying out a detailed list of objections to FCNL's priorities, methods and ethos, and calling on the Yearly Meeting to cut all ties with the FCNL. The four also wrote to FCNL and asked to have their names removed from all committee and mailing lists. FCNL complied, "with very deep regret."

Shortly thereafter, the other three Iowa delegates issued a response, urging continued Yearly Meeting support of FCNL. In March the issue was joined directly and warmly at the Yearly Meeting's representative meeting. There was no unity, however, and the issue is scheduled to come before the full Yearly Meeting in August.

Feelings among the FCNL's Iowa critics are running high. After the March discussion, one of the four, a pastor named Dave Pinkerton, resigned his pastorate and dropped his membership from Friends entirely. Others have hinted that whole congregations may leave the Yearly Meeting if it does not cut ties with the FCNL.

The Objections: "Universalism and Humanism"

According to their letters, the critics were unhappy primarily with what they called "the predominance of Universalism and Humanism, which," they felt, "apparently controls FCNL's thinking and legislative policy." They also sensed an "atmosphere of ridicule toward fundamental Christians" at the Annual Meeting. On issues, they were disappointed that FCNL did not actively oppose abortion and homosexuality; they were dismayed that it supported handgun control, the ERA and disarmament. They felt FCNL's tone was "extremely left-wing and socialistic in tendency," with "anti-American overtones"; they felt that "some extreme radicals are tolerated and nurtured within the FCNL group." They concluded that "Iowa Yearly Meeting must take a strong stand to combat the evil force of false doctrine that is creeping more and more into our meetings and destroying the souls of those we love. We cannot set back and let this happen to us as it has happened to others.""

While there is no doubt that FCNL espouses a fairly "liberal" position on many issues, much of this is clearly a matter of perspective and FCNL has not replied to the charges in detail. Executive Secretary Ed Snyder, however, did write in response that "It is my sense that diversity is inevitable and not necessarily to be viewed as a flaw," and expressed hope that "the differing views which Friends hold can be in a creative tension which requires all of us to continue our spiritual growth." The other Iowa delegates reported very positive reactions to the Annual Meeting, expressing surprise and dismay that the critics "found so little in a gathering which to others was alive with manifestations of the Spirit."

The Significance of the Controversy

It is ironic that FCNL should be the target of charges of narrowness, because no Quaker action group in my experience has worked harder or longer at the difficult task of staying close and responsive to a broad range of Friends. Apparently the spectrum is much of what so offended the Iowa critics. Thus, paradoxically, FCNL's very success in attracting participation by a variety of Friends is what puts it in this crossfire.

Further, after interviewing three of the Iowa critics, I can report that their complaints are not directed solely and perhaps not even primarily at FCNL, but rather at their Yearly Meeting and trends among "liberal" Friends generally. In this sense, they are emblematic of mounting social tensions which are spreading across the continent, tensions exacerbated by religious controversies and agitation. The situation is made more difficult by the fact that there are many good people and good Friends who feel strongly on both sides.

In my opinion, Friends will be experiencing more such difficulties. And the hope of some to purge the Society of its diversity seems to be doomed to failure. For better

and for worse, American Friends seem destined to remain a hopelessly mixed bag. But rather than simply complaining about this (and one can hear strong complaints from both ends of the spectrum), viewing our diversity as only a source of problems, why can't we also see it as presenting us important opportunities as well? In fact, if we were willing, American Friends could serve almost as a laboratory in which to explore ways to live peaceably with and perhaps even begin to resolve some of these conflicts. Such work would probably be one of the most important contributions we could make to American society in the coming years. Certainly there is great potential for dangerous social disruption growing out of such unreconciled religio-social antagonisms.

Bridgebuilding: New Quaker Priority?

This "laboratory" work could proceed through a process of Quaker bridgebuilding, adapting techniques used by Quaker service groups working for reconciliation between races and nations: exchanges, dialogues, work camps, etc. There have been some valuable efforts in this direction already at higher levels: various national and international conferences--and the ongoing work of the FCNL, which to me is one of the best examples of this bridgebuilding. Another promising example is the Friends Travel Directory published by Friends General Conference. The forthcoming edition will include Friends from other associations as well.

One other very valuable tool is a book, Issues of Theological Conflict, by Richard J. Coleman, published by Eerdmans Publishing Co. of Grand Rapids, MI. His fair, careful treatment of the issues dividing Conservative and Liberal Christians (including Friends) is extremely enlightening. His conclusions that both perspectives are potentially valid, but that both can be taken to extremes, and that both can learn from each other, is in my judgment correct. I recommend this book strongly to Friends concerned with these questions.

Thus, valuable beginnings have been made; what is being suggested here is that these efforts be increased at the grassroots level, and made a regular program priority by Meetings large and small.

Besides being obviously timely, such Quaker bridgebuilding is also part of our religious witness. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another." (John 13:35)

What Is At Stake: Future Quaker Unity

Without bridgebuilding, we face polarization and separation. This is shown vividly by Quaker history, and currently by the case of David Pinkerton, one of the Iowa critics. "How," he asked in a letter to FCNL, "do two divergent groups, both equally sincere and fully convinced of the accuracy of their positions come to terms without compromises that will seriously undermine the validity of their original convictions?" He was not talking about Arabs and Jews, capitalists and communists, he said, but rather about "the obvious differences between Friends and 'Friends'...."

The theoretical answer to his question is that with persistence, patience, humility, a prayerful attitude and a sense of real fellowship to work with such differences can be resolved; bridges can be built. But Dave Pinkerton could find no bridge; now, regrettably he is lost to Friends, and many others in Iowa may yet follow him.

So let us pray for Friends in Iowa Yearly Meeting, that they may be attentive to the Light of Christ as they struggle to build bridges over the gulfs that threaten to separate them. Let us also be grateful for FCNL's continuing efforts to listen and be sensitive to as broad a spectrum of Friends as it can. And let us consider adding to our own Quaker priorities a concern to work for peace, not just far away, but here at home as well--not only in the Middle East, but also in the Middle West.

INSIDE: A NEW THREAT
TO QUAKER UNITY?

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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

On the twelfth day of May, 1746, John Woolman set off from his home in Mount Holly on his first journey into the south, to labor with Friends there about slavery, as he had already labored with Friends in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Woolman was comparatively young, and although respected as a minister, his concern to free chattel blacks was by no means universally shared among the Society of the day. In fact, he met mostly with disappointment on this journey, as slaveholding Friends repeated to him all the familiar rationalizations for the practice: The Bible prescribed it for the blacks as sons of Cain, they claimed; blacks were unable to take care of themselves anyway; slavery was really in their best interest; and so forth.

By all reports Woolman relied on patient, gentle but persistent pleading rather than argument to make his case. He apparently managed to stay on good terms with most of those he visited, because he was welcomed on later journeys as an honored guest, even though he brought the same challenging message again.

Woolman's commitment never wavered, and his approach continued to be one of gentle persistence. Eventually his testimony was fully adopted by American Friends. The Society was cleared of slaveholding without schism, and later Friends in Virginia and North Carolina suffered much and nobly for bearing this testimony in their hostile home communities.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

A Rhyming Quaker Calendar

In the days of plain speech, Quakers could not use the old rhyme "Thirty Days Hath September" to remember the changing lengths of months. But ever resourceful, Friends developed their own version, thus:

The fourth, eleventh, ninth and sixth,
Have thirty days to each affixed;
And every other thirty-one,

Except the second month alone,
Which has but twenty-eight in fine,
Til leap year gives it twenty-nine.

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