



A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Seven

Tenth Month 1981

Dear Friend,

On the 30th of Ninth Month, near the Oregon coast, a meeting took place which could be very important for the future of American Quakerism. The two top executives of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Board Chairman Stephen Cary and Executive Secretary Asia Bennett met behind closed doors with Yearly Meeting and Association executives from all over the country and all the largest branches of Friends.

The meeting was part of the annual Superintendents and Secretaries Meeting, an informal conference which has for over twenty years brought together the key cadre of our constituent organizations for off-the-record fellowship and ecumenical sharing. The Meeting invited Asia Bennett and Stephen Cary to visit after last year's session, in hopes of developing a better mutual understanding of the range of deep concerns about AFSC policies, procedures and programs that have become so widespread among Friends of widely varying perspectives and backgrounds, including many longtime AFSC supporters.

For several Yearly Meeting executives, especially those of Evangelical groups, this was the first time they had ever sat down and talked, face-to-face with any Service Committee representatives. Suspicion of the AFSC among Evangelical Friends goes back almost to its beginnings, and some of their Yearly Meetings have long since disowned it.

Unsurprisingly, then, the meeting was an intense one. Although scheduled to last only two hours, it went on for almost four; sources insist, however, that the spirit was Friendly throughout. In my view if this encounter were to become the opening round in an ongoing series of discussions between the AFSC and those Quakers who have become estranged from it, the gathering could be a turning point for us all. I wholeheartedly commend the Superintendents and Secretaries for extending the invitation, as well as Stephen Cary and Asia Bennett for accepting it. I have long felt that the problems of the AFSC are intimately connected with the problems of American Quakerdom at large; and while considerable change within AFSC is necessary, it is not sufficient; longterm resolution of its difficulties will require mutual efforts, of which the Oregon meeting could and should become a shining example.

This is not to suggest that anything was resolved in this session; clearly it was not. It is hard in my judgment to overstate just how much work lies ahead if constructive relationships between the AFSC and its Quaker critics are to be reconstructed. This is true now for many more than Evangelicals, as the article in this issue tries to show.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager
Chuck Fager

PS. If you are not a subscriber, I hope you will become one: a year, 12 issues, is \$12. And let me add that several subscribers have written to ask for bundles of extra back issues to distribute among interested Friends. Naturally I am very grateful for such support. If you would like some extra copies, just let me know how many; and send a few stamps if you can, to help with postage. And thanks for your interest!

THE AFSC AND ITS FRIENDLY CRITICS

Evangelical complaints about the AFSC from 1920 bear a striking resemblance to their complaints in 1981: both center around the AFSC's lack of an explicit Christian identification, and the perception that the organization has been unresponsive to their concerns. Today, however, these perennial critics have been joined by a growing number of Liberal Friends and Meetings, which have voiced somewhat similar criticisms. They are similar or at least parallel even though based in the Liberal view of Quaker identity. Unfortunately, they are also parallel in that since these Liberal Friends' concerns surfaced, at Friends General Conference in 1979, there is little evidence that, beyond evoking considerable discussion, they have been heeded much more than the Evangelicals' concerns. If anything, the relationships involved seem to be continuing to deteriorate. How deep these concerns now run can be gauged from the fact that two Eastern Meetings, which have supported the AFSC for many decades, recently retargeted their annual contributions away from Philadelphia in protest against certain issues which they feel remain unaddressed. Other Meetings have considered similar action.

The Key Issues: Identity and Governance

The first point in the current critique involves Quaker identity: Friends have wanted the Service Committee to be an interfaith, multicultural body; but now more and more Friends are doubtful that Friends are any longer adequately represented on the AFSC staff. Here the numbers and trends are not encouraging: According to its own data, barely 20% of the AFSC staff are now Friends; by contrast, it was close to 55% in 1962. In addition, the Board was told last year that only 10% of the year's new staff appointments were Friends. Of the national administrative staff, 36% are Quakers, compared with 56% in 1962. Perhaps more significant, in that year 27 of 28 top administrators in Philadelphia were Friends; today, all three major program divisions are headed by non-Friends. The numbers for overseas staff follow the same pattern: in 1962, 54% were Friends; yet as of last Spring, there were *no Friends at all* among the AFSC's program staff in Latin America, the Middle East, or Africa.

The second key issue in the Liberals' critique flows from the first, and has to do with governance. In sum, the critics believe that staff, especially in Philadelphia, have joined with a small coterie of like-minded Board members to take effective control of the organization. This transfer has meant the exclusion of an increasingly large proportion of the AFSC's traditional Quaker supporters from any meaningful role in its affairs--particularly those who have voiced their concerns.

While numbers are less useful here, the evidence for this shift is still not hard to find: For instance, staff now routinely serve on program committees, and thereby maintain an effective veto over recommendations to the Board regarding program, as well as nominations for their own supervisors. The work of three staff-initiated, in-house special interest groups, The Third World Coalition, the Affirmative Action Program and the Nationwide Women's Program, serves to reinforce this staff influence. This amounts to a built-in conflict of interest; but in addition, blatant individual conflicts of interest involving Board members and staff have been tolerated and continued, even after protests from other Board members.

The Board and Corporation: Turning Into Figureheads?

The Board itself, under the By-Laws, is drawn from the Corporation, to which Yearly Meetings send delegates, and which is the AFSC's legal constituting body. It is the Corporation, which meets once a year for a few heavily-programmed (mostly by staff) hours, to which the bulk of Friends' complaints are referred, as the "official link" between AFSC and the larger body of Friends. Yet not many Friends realize that the Yearly Meetings' delegates are outnumbered almost three to one by "At Large" Corporation members selected by the Philadelphia-based Nominating Committee. Moreover, the same Nominating Committee selects the Board, and currently only *three* Board members out of forty are Yearly Meeting delegates--and this is an unusually high number; all the rest are from the "At Large" ranks. Does this help explain why the Board and Corporation have so often shrugged aside outside criticism and gone along with staff recommendations in recent years? The critics think so. In any case, Board minutes, and reports from members, make it clear not only that staff typically outnumber Board members

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at Board meetings, but that they also take an active, even assertive role in the deliberations.

This informal "power structure," argue the critics, is unrepresentative of and unresponsive to the larger body of Friends, and hence in pursuing its interests it has moved the Service Committee far away from its traditional Quaker constituency, even among Liberals. As evidence, they point to a series of policy and program decisions which have, they believe, lacked full fidelity to such Quaker testimonies as nonviolence, respect for all sides in conflict situations, good order, and even veracity. This last may be the gravest criticism of all. As expressed in a lengthy statement of concerns by Southern Appalachia Yearly Meeting earlier this year, it "is perhaps the most serious claim that one could make against a Quaker organization....Truth telling is, or should be, the central Quaker testimony."

Veracity, Expert Critiques, and Controversy

Have some of AFSC's recent program decisions and publications lacked veracity? Several have been subjected to intense, informed criticism by Friends of considerable weight and expertise in the relevant fields, many of whom have also been AFSC supporters. Examples include critiques of AFSC literature on nuclear power by Victor Vaughen, Clerk of Knoxville, Tennessee Meeting and a nuclear scientist; a dissection of AFSC advocacy of a "New International Economic Order" by John Powelson of Boulder, Colorado Meeting, an international economist; a critique of AFSC's Southern Africa program by Hendrik van der Merve, Clerk of South Africa General Meeting. And there are others.

I am unable to judge the technical aspects of these critiques, but having examined them I do believe they have at least shown that many of AFSC's recent positions and publications, even if they were technically accurate, have too often been tendentious, poorly documented and blatantly partisan. Moreover, it seems undeniable that in these cases and others, both the AFSC position and the manner in which it has been advanced have been sources of growing unease and controversy among Friends, including longtime AFSC supporters.

Thus far, the Board's main response to these growing concerns has been to issue a long, rather bland statement, dated 6/27/1980, which essentially turned aside the concerns that had been raised. Thus it is not surprising that the unease has continued to spread. Similar Board statements have been issued before; but they have not done much to halt the continued erosion of the Service Committee's base in the larger body of American Friends.

Modest Suggestions for Sweeping Change

In my judgement, the situation has gone so far that suggestions for concrete remedial efforts are of necessity rather sweeping in character. Here are several, culled from the statements of recent critics and my own studies:

First, a crash Affirmative Action Program for Quakers ought to be undertaken at once. Nothing else is solvable unless the AFSC once again becomes a predominantly Quaker body, and not only one of Quaker origins. *Second*, lay control ought to be firmly re-established. This would entail several changes: eliminating the staff veto over policy, program and personnel decisions; strictly prohibiting conflicts of interest on the part of Board and staff; and substantially increasing the numbers of Board members from Yearly Meeting Corporation delegates. *Third*, thoroughly review programs and publications that have caused controversy among Friends, revising them as necessary to meet the highest Quaker standards of research, fairness and veracity. This would of necessity involve consultations with many expert Friends whose views have not previously been taken into account. *Fourth*, Last month's Oregon meeting ought to become the beginning of a sustained effort to rebuild friendly contacts with Evangelical Quakers, from whom we all have much to learn.

This is a tall order, of course. A skeptic might ask whether it is practical? To me, the more important question is: How much longer can the AFSC expect to operate with a continually shrinking base of support among American Friends? I am reminded that Rufus Jones conceived of the Service Committee's role as including bringing the various groups of Friends closer together. Today, regrettably, it can be said without much exaggeration that the AFSC has become probably the most divisive internal force in American Quakerism. Can this situation be redressed? I pray it can; but often it is difficult to hope.

INSIDE: THE AFSC AND ITS CRITICS--
 CAN WE PUT THE "Q" BACK
 IN QUAKER SERVICE?

From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
 P.O. Box 1361
 Falls Church VA 22041

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

What a month full of history this is! In 1660, for instance, a judge in Oxford, England was the first to begin demanding that Quakers swear an oath of allegiance, and to use their refusal to do so as a pretext for having them jailed, fined, often tortured, and deprived of their property. Many thousands of Friends suffered for decades under this kind of persecution. The year before, on 10/27, two Quaker missionaries, William Robinson and Marmaduke Stephenson, were hung on Boston Common, after they refused to stop spreading their "subversive" message in the Puritan colony. Before they died they declared to the watching crowd, "Be it known unto all this day, that we suffer not as evil-doers but for conscience sake."

Perhaps the most moving story from this month, however, comes from 1660 and concerns James Nayler. After years of disgrace, imprisonment and torture growing out of an episode of religious excess in 1656, Nayler was finally reconciled to Friends and released from prison. In this month, he set off on foot to visit his family in the North of England. But near Huntingdon he was attacked by robbers, tied up, beaten and left for dead in a field. He was later found and taken to a Friend's house, where he died the next day. But before he expired, he uttered those famous last words which we repeat and cherish 320 years later, and which begin: "There is a spirit which I feel, which delights to do no evil, nor to revenge any wrong, but delights to endure all things, in hope to enjoy its own in the end...."

QUAKER CHUCKLE

A Truly Inspired Scripture

Many years ago, a young Quakeress, as they were then called, was visited by three male Friends, each of which wished to propose to her. But each was at first blocked by the presence of the others. Finally, however, the young man she favored, knowing that she was a diligent Bible student, pulled out his copy and opened it to the First Epistle of John. Pointing to the Fifth Verse, he passed her the book, wherein she read, "And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another."

Thinking just as quickly, she passed the Bible back to her suitor, indicating Verse Twelve in the same Epistle. In triumph, the young man read, "Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink; but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full."