IMPROVING QUAKER PEACE WITNESS: SOME SUGGESTIONS

Does your meeting or church have trouble figuring out how to witness for peace? Mine does. Quaker individualism and diversity are no more evident and frustrating than when it comes to the Peace Testimony, which is supposed to be a common Quaker characteristic. Just how wide this diversity can be was shown when our Peace Committee, at Langley Hill Monthly Meeting in Virginia, took a survey of our members. About 60 people responded; that's about one-third of our resident members. These 60 people were involved with 30 different peace groups and activities. Among the whole membership, that total may well be twice as large. And I don't think we are exceptional in our range of activity.

Now in one sense these figures are reassuring, because they show that Friends take the Peace Testimony seriously and work at it. But at the same time, this variety creates problems, particularly when we try to get together to address peace concerns *as a group*. The wide range and individualistic style of our involvements act as centrifugal forces, pulling Friends away from the Society and into Society.

Deploring Diversity: No Help

This pulling apart has left our Peace Committee struggling to define a mission for itself within the meeting, and for the meeting as a body. Again, I doubt if we are exceptional in having this problem. I know of meetings which have laid down their Peace Committees in frustration, and others where their committees exist mainly on paper. So what can be done to bring such committees to life and make them useful in building a corporate Peace Witness?

One frequent response to such a question is to deplore the diversity which gives rise to it: "If *only* Friends could get *together* on something, *anything*." Nostalgic glances are cast back at early Friends' seemingly more unified peace stands; and the rare recent occasions, usually emergencies, when large numbers of Friends have united in common witness are presented as models against which our typical rainbow of activity is measured and found wanting. (I know this attitude well; for many years I shared it, loudly and often.)

Such a response has two defects, however: First, it is a guaranteed recipe for frustration; and second, it is based on a misreading of the character of Quaker witness. Further, when such sentiments become alloyed with even a little self-righteousness (as they so easily do), they rapidly turn diversity into divisiveness. My own attitude in this regard has turned almost entirely around, to the view, expressed here last month, that the variety of Friends' action is an asset rather than a liability. Can this attitude be usefully applied to the task of building a Peace Witness in larger Friends bodies? It may sound paradoxical, but I think so. The key difference is in the *concept* of corporate Peace Witness: it involves coming to regard the role of the meeting or church and its Peace Committee as a *supportive, clarifying* and *facilitating* one, rather than as a standardizing or unifying one.

Three Possible Priorities For Peace Committees

This concept is what I think our Langley Hill Peace Committee is moving toward, after extensive discussion of our survey and its results. Such a supportive/facilitating approach seems to imply three priorities for our work together:

1. *Exploring and enriching the religious basis of our peace efforts.* This for me definitely comes at the top of the list; a genuine spiritual life is the foundation of and sustenance for authentic Quaker witness in the world. To a great extent, of course, this priority is observed every time we gather for worship. But there are many specialized activities which can express it as well: retreats, Bible study, and so forth. A Peace Committee with even a little self-righteousness [illegible] which did nothing but this [illegible] nurture the religious roots of its members and individuals as they [illegible] [illegible] in no indeed be fully carried out [illegible]

leadings seems to me to be a part of our religious calling: Jesus told his followers(M 10:16) to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves;" Quakers today, I think, lean to on the harmless part over the need for practical wisdom in peace work. Yet not every or program with "PEACE" tacked onto it is useful or prudent. We need a "Consumers Guid Practical Peacemaking," and in a future issue I expect to have more to say about such In the meantime, suffice it to say that study and discussion are the principal instrum for this process, while informed judgment rather than unanimity is its goal.

3. *Support for Friends' peacemaking efforts.* An emphasis on individual effort Friends should not mean that we all work in isolation. Rather, it means we join toget voluntarily, according to our leadings, instead of taking marching orders from some church hierarchy. This pattern is what produces such a plethora of Quaker committees. should also give a Peace Committee many opportunities for assistance and support throu a meeting or church.

For instance, at Langley Hill we recently began a regular monthly program of l writing, one First day after worship. Originally this was done only on behalf of Amne International's prisoners of conscience program, which is a concern of some members. now it has been opened up to the concerns of other Friends, such as the FCNL's legisla alerts, opposition to the draft, and so forth; there are, after all, many good causes write letters about. Other meetings and churches undertake fundraising efforts for pe groups and projects, and offer support to individual members, such as tax resisters, w face suffering on account of conscientious peace stands.

A Useful Focus For Friends' Organizations, Too

Taking a facilitating approach to peace work makes sense not only at the local ing or church level. I think that Yearly Meetings, associations and Quaker service gr would be much more valuable to local Friends to the extent that they adopted a similar approach. Too often their activities are presented to local groups in the form of an unending stream of appeals to support this or that undoubtedly good cause or project. American Friends are very much in need of skilled peace professionals who come to us a ask how they can assist *us* in determining our own concerns, learning how to nurture th religious life which must sustain us, and figuring out practical ways of using our spe always limited resources to mount a meaningful witness where we are. I am not aware o any examples of such an approach in action; readers who do know of them are urged to l me know about them, so they can be duly noted in future issues. Such a facilitating a tude would have the further benefit of promoting a sense among individual Friends tha service groups are indeed working on their behalf, and would go far toward repairing t alienation that is often expressed with regard to various groups and projects.

A Full Agenda For A Peace Committee

In sum, it seems possible that a Peace Committee in a meeting or church can fi plenty of valuable work to do without facing the frustration of trying to mold Quaker riety into some phantom common program. These three priorities--nurturing the religio roots of peace work; testing and clarifying Friends' leadings; and supporting their va ious efforts through meetings and churches--offer enough possibilities to fill any com tee's agenda. Furthermore, when grave national or international emergencies come alon as they surely will, and some more unified corporate response seems called for and lik an active, busy committee will be more able to meet the challenge than a demoralized, inactive one.

Finally, I feel that a focus on these priorities can not only keep a Peace Com ittee busy, but through it help create a dynamic balance between our many individual leadings as Friends, and our life together as a Religious Society. Finding such a bal is difficult, and sustaining it even more so; yet this effort has much to do with what makes Quakerism such a unique and attractive religious phenomenon.

From: Chuck Fager, *A Friendly Letter*
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INSIDE: NEW PEACE PRIORITIES, AND OUR FIRST CONTEST!

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

First the good news: In Second Month 1688, the first recorded protest against slavery in America was made, and it was made by Quakers in Germantown Meeting, near Philadelphia. In those days Germantown was indeed populated mainly by German immigrants to William Penn's "Holy Experiment," and their command of English was less than complete. So the petition they presented was somewhat fractured in its syntax, though unmistakable in its sentiments: "Oh! Doe consider well this thing," the Friends wrote, "you who doe it if you would be done this manner! And if it be done according Christianity?" They ask: "who shall maintain this your cause or plaid for it. Truly we cannot doe so....Pray! What thing in the world can be done worse toward us than if men should rob or steal away and sell us for slaves...?"

Now the bad news: The petition was speaking mainly of the practice of other Quakers. Furthermore, it was not exactly received by the Germantown Monthly Meeting with enthusiasm. No, the Monthly Meeting declined to act on it at all. Instead, it was bucked up to the Quarterly Meeting, which similarly bucked it to the Yearly Meeting. The Yearly Meeting found these sentiments so embarrassing that the petition was buried, so well that a copy was not found for over a hundred years.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

Credentials For Quaker Service

One busy Friend was recently heard complaining to another about the tremendous volume of mail he received as a result of serving on Quaker committees. "It almost seems as though I need a Master's Degree in Library Science just to file it all," he said.

The other Friend, who was of quick wit and a practical bent, replied, "Actually, all you really need is a Bachelor's Degree in solid waste disposal."

--Thanks to David Truax, North Meadow Circle of Friends, Indianapolis, Indiana

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Friend, does thee know a good Quaker Chuckle? If so, send it to A Friendly Letter and share it with other Friends!