



A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Fourteen

Fifth Month 1982

Dear Friends,

My apologies, first, for the delay in publication of this issue. I spent much of the past month travelling, partly on business but also among Friends, specifically the Evangelical Friends of Northwest Yearly Meeting in Oregon. They received me most graciously and hospitably, and we threshed a variety of issues with which American Friends are currently grappling. I hope my understanding of this branch of American Quakerism has thereby been improved, and that this improvement will show in these columns.

This month we look again at a series of events in Iowa Yearly Meeting (IYM) that has been mentioned here before, and which has now perhaps reached a culmination. One aspect of these events mentioned only in passing in the article is an impending change of leadership in the yearly meeting which reflects another trend also reported on here before, namely the emergence of a new generation of Quaker leadership. Besides Iowa, several other major Quaker groups have recently made important leadership decisions: Here I will mention only the appointment of Lloyd Lee Wilson of Roanoke-Blacksburg Monthly Meeting in Virginia as the new General Secretary of Friends General Conference; and Sam Caldwell as the incoming Executive Secretary of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Both these Friends bring broad vision and demonstrated abilities to their new posts; they should make great contributions to American Quakerism. And there will be more major appointments soon to come.

On a more businesslike note, the Yearly Meeting and Quaker conference season is also soon to come, and with it, I hope, the chance to circulate more widely the various items produced by Kimo Press, the other part of my mini-Quaker publishing conglomerate. In particular, our Quaker postcards and buttons have been very popular among Friends of all varieties, and their sale helps keep *A Friendly Letter* afloat. If you think your Yearly Meeting might be receptive to these items, I would like to hear from you. A consignment shipment can be sent to the person responsible for bookstore operations, offering generous commissions, no risk, and minimal paperwork.

There is one other matter on which I would like some reader advice: A number of perceptive readers have suggested that this newsletter would be easier to read if I rearranged the copy in double columns on each page. I am uncertain whether this would be a good idea; I admit I am conservative about my design. So if you have had thoughts about this, let me hear them: Is the present format agreeable, or would double columns be better for you? I will report the results of this informal poll in the issue for Eighth Month.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

Meeting, one of the more liberal in the YM, has resolved to leave Iowa YM this summer, and will be sending representatives to various other YMs this summer in search of another affiliation. While the concerns which are culminating in its departure predate the FCNL conflict, this struggle exemplifies them and may well have been the last straw. As it was explained to me, maintaining the internal unity of the Minneapolis Meeting made necessary a departure from their Yearly Meeting.

Looking Ahead: Seeking to Rediscover and Nurture Unity

What now for Iowa Yearly Meeting? With the departure of those who had spearheaded the drive against FCNL and the other groups, everyone I spoke with expected, or at least hoped, that the matter would be allowed to rest, at least for awhile. This sentiment was voiced very strongly by Steven Main, who later this summer will become the YM's new Superintendent. Main, presently pastor of Le Grand Friends Church, told me his first priorities would be to work for reconciliation and increased unity within the Yearly Meeting. Main was also a delegate from Iowa YM to the FCNL's 1981 Annual Meeting, and his experience there reflects a sharply different perspective from that of the previous year's delegates: while at the FCNL sessions he voiced some of the same concerns as had the dissidents (e.g., opposition to abortion and homosexuality); still his attitude toward FCNL was very positive, despite the fact that these positions were not adopted by the group. He told me he felt his views had been heard and considered in a respectful and friendly manner. He had not yet found any difficulty in disagreeing with some other Friends yet still remaining friendly with them.

Steven Main's comments and outlook were echoed by others who had attended the 1981 FCNL sessions from Iowa YM. But just how widespread they now are in the YM membership remains to be seen, and is undoubtedly the key to the quest for unity. Just how sharply this attitude differs from that of the departed dissidents can be seen from the letter they wrote to the YM in 1/81. In it they insisted 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."

Unity Versus Truth: A Continuing Tension

While I don't share many of the dissidents' specific views, it is still easy to empathize with them. Quakers have long held that truth is to be pursued come what may, and that organizational unity ought not to be preserved at its expense. We have drawn many lines in our history: against slaveholding, against participation in military service—as well as against some other things, like owning a piano or wearing brightly colored clothing, of which we may not today be so proud. For most of us, there are issues on which the idea of compromise is distasteful or even downright unacceptable. For the Iowa dissidents, taking a stand against "false doctrine" required fencing out of their association those sectors of Quakerism associated with FCNL, AFSC and FWCC. These are rather large sectors of the Society of Friends; the bulk of it, in fact.

Steven Main, and others including myself, argue that in our time it is possible and even imperative to take one's stands on contested issues within the wide diversity of contemporary Quakerism while remaining on good terms and in fellowship with Friends of other viewpoints, even viewpoints radically different from ours. This is the course that Iowa YM has apparently chosen to follow, and it is one I applaud. But like the course of exclusion, it is a course that also has ambiguities, risks and costs. It has apparently cost Iowa one whole Meeting, Minneapolis, in the effort to retain another, New Sharon, and the outlook it epitomized. Was the game worth the candle? Who is to say? I only know for certain that Friends are not given any options that are guaranteed safe and free of cost as we face the many challenges to our internal unity and our external witness to the world.

IOWA YEARLY MEETING: THE COST OF UNITY

For well over a year, Iowa Yearly Meeting (IYM) has been struggling with serious inter-strains centered on its connections to several Quaker organizations, among them the Friend Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and more recently the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC). Earlier this spring, these tensions reached something of a climax, and perhaps a resolution.

As reported extensively here (in issues #2 and #5, copies of which are still available at back issue rates), these tensions were focussed on a demand that the IYM cut all organizational ties with and cease financial contributions to these groups, along with a non-Quaker group, the Iowa Peace Network. The call came principally from a group of strongly conservative Evangelical Friends, several of whom had attended the FCNL's 1980 Annual Meeting in Washington DC. These Friends were shocked by much of what they saw and heard there: they strongly objected to several of FCNL's priorities (e.g., for the Equal Rights Amendment, handgun control and disarmament), as well as to its lack of positions in other areas (e.g., against abortion and homosexuality). In a letter sent in 1/81 to all the IYM's meetings and churches, they denounced what they saw as the "Universalism and Humanism which," they felt, "apparently controls FCNL's thinking and legislative policy," and made it "extremely left-wing and socialistic in tendency" and full of "anti-American overtones."

An Early Setback, and a Renewed Effort

The proposal to cut ties with FCNL came before the IYM's Body of Representatives in Third Month 1981, but there was no unity and the issue was laid over to the Yearly Meeting sessions in Eighth Month. There it found so little support that, after extensive discussion, the IYM's existing ties, and corporate contributions, were all reaffirmed.

But that action did not settle the matter. When the Body of Representatives met again, on 3/13/82, the disaffiliation proposal resurfaced, this time with AFSC, FWCC and the Iowa Peace Network included. (Just why the FWCC was added I have been unable to determine, despite several inquiries. Controversy about AFSC and a local peace group are more understandable; they have taken positions which many conservatives disagree with. But FWCC is not an issue action group; its main agenda is contact among various groups of Friends. But perhaps this was enough.)

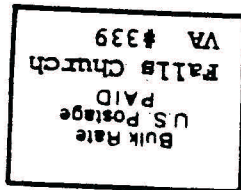
The Attempt to Find a "Compromise"

After lengthy deliberations, the Body of Representatives agreed to delete contributions to these groups from the IYM budget, while retaining formal affiliation and accepting financial contributions designated specifically for them. This action, intended as a compromise, had been proposed earlier during the debate at the 1981 IYM sessions, but had not found much support then. Now most Friends felt it was necessary to show some measure of recognition of the dissidents' concerns. "We were bending over backward for them," one member told me. "Our overriding concern was the unity of the Yearly Meeting." The Representatives were especially hoping to keep the New Sharon Friends Church, in which the dissidence was strongest, from leaving the Yearly Meeting.

As a compromise, this action both succeeded and failed. The next day, 3/14, a called business meeting was held at New Sharon, to consider a proposal to leave the Yearly Meeting, brought by several members including those who had led the campaign against FCNL and the other groups. The IYM's action was not enough, they insisted; it still left them formally associated with policies and organizations they could not accept. But the proposal to leave the IYM was not agreed to; and when this outcome was clear, nine members, the core of the dissidents, left the church in a body and are now attending other, unaffiliated churches in their community.

So the New Sharon Church is staying in the IYM, if at the cost of internal separation. Ironically, the one formal schism associated with this controversy came not among the more conservative Iowa churches, but rather at the other end of the spectrum: Minneapolis

INSIDE: ORDER IN JUNE YEARLY MEETING:
THE COSTS OF QUAKER UNITY



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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

This is the month of one of my favorite Quaker stories: in 1775, Continental troops landed on Nantucket Island off Massachusetts and confronted the island's wealthiest merchant, a Quaker named William Rotch. Rotch had received a large number of muskets with bayonets in settlement of an old debt, and the fledgling U.S. forces wanted them. The muskets had been sold as fowling pieces, but Rotch had held back the bayonets, since they had no purpose except killing in war. As Rotch recalled the encounter many years later: "The time was now come to endeavor to support our Testimony against War, or abandon it....I could not hesitate which to choose, and therefore denied the applicant. My reason for not furnishing them was demanded, to which I readily answered, 'As this instrument is purposely made and used for the destruction of mankind, I can out no weapon into a man's hand to destroy another, that I cannot use myself in the same way.'" Rotch soon thereafter threw the bayonets into the sea. He was called before a Continental commission to answer for his conduct, and explained his stand in traditional Quaker terms. A commission member then observed "'then your principles are passive Obedience and non-resistance.'" To which Rotch replied: "'No my friend, our principles are active Obedience or passive suffering.'" (These quotes are from Rotch's autobiographical *Memorandum*, which has been reprinted by Kimo Press.)

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Caring For Caretakers

A Meeting in the West recently considered whether to re-establish its Garden Committee, which had languished and withered some time before. When the subject came up, a former Meeting clerk spoke up: "Oh yes--I remember the Garden Committee; I was on it for awhile. That's where they sent you for R&R after too many years on Ministry and Oversight."

A Lack of Intestinal Fortitude

Many years ago, the legendary William Bacon Evans, Philadelphia's last plain Friend, was visiting a Quaker school where Mid-week Meeting was still compulsory. The students disliked this requirement, and showed their sentiment by bringing newspapers and magazines to read and rattle as they sat in the silence. Friend Evans was sitting on the facing bench; and after listening to the rustle of papers and sensing the rise in aggravation of those present, he finally rose and said, "As one skeleton said to the other as they hung in the closet, 'If we had any guts, we'd get out of here.'" --Thank to subscriber Virginia Neff of San Francisco
