

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Fifteen

Sixth Month, 1982

Dear Friend,

I have been following the progress of the United Nations Law of the Sea Treaty negotiations since the beginning of this letter, and the latest report is this: the Reagan administration is expected soon to announce whether it will attend the final wrapup session in Ninth Month, and sign the finished document. Pressure on the White House to refuse any further dealings with the conference is said to be strong, especially from the president's right wing supporters. Friends who believe the treaty is a step toward peace may want to consider writing to the President or Congress reaffirming these views. Unfortunately, this cliffhanging character of the administration's responses to the treaty could continue for several more months as the final steps to its completion are gone through.

On another topic of recent attention, in Issue Number Thirteen I spoke about our all-but forgotten testimony on alcohol. Since then I have done further research in this area, for an article being submitted to secular newspapers. In the course of my investigation, I have discovered that there is a new Temperance movement coming into view in American society, one with a challenging platform, a skilled cadre of organizers, a constituency and an issue with which it could be launched into prominence. What this means is that the situation at large is not so bleak as I thought, though this new movement is bound to be controversial. An interesting feature of this new movement is that the churches, which provided most of the troops for earlier such crusades, have not yet noticed this new one, and that includes Friends.

I would be happy to share this article with anyone who is interested. If you would like a copy, let me know, and include \$2.00 to cover copying and postage.

Finally, congratulations to the six winners of our Young Friends Peace Poster Contest. Their winning entries are now part of a display which is available for loan to Meetings and churches; write to me for details if you are interested in that as well. The winners are:

Anita Crofts, 11, of Newtown PA
Jonathan Hellebuyck, 9, of Minneapolis MN
Danny Holcomb, 12, of Lake Forest IL
Sarah Crofts, 9, Newtown PA
Kajsa Cadwell, 11, Plymouth PA
Nelson Alexander, 6, Des Moines IA

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

No issue brings out the tensions among American Friends more sharply than homosexuality. But these tensions, in my experience, go beyond homosexuality itself to two underlying and unresolved questions: First, the religious authority and proper interpretation of the Bible among Friends; and second, the limits of diversity and tolerance among us. Repeatedly in recent years Quaker bodies have tried to keep this issue from surfacing, in part to avoid having to confront these underlying questions which it evokes. Yet the issue keeps reappearing, and I expect it to continue to do so. The result has often been turmoil; but it has also produced some examples of real courage and Christian compassion, not to mention learning on the part of all the Friends involved.

No case exemplifies these characteristics better than that of West Elkton Friends Church in West Elkton, Ohio. A part of Indiana Yearly Meeting, West Elkton has for nine years had as its pastor Ken Story, an Earlham School of Religion graduate. In Fourth Month of 1980, Story was contacted by a woman named Beverly Brubaker, who asked if she and a friend, Joann Jones, would be welcome at the church. Joann Jones and Beverly Brubaker are remarkable women, who would normally be considered an asset to any church: Jones had twice been named Mother of the Year by local groups, in recognition of the quality and dedication of her work with handicapped children; together, Jones and Brubaker operate a foster home for 13 handicapped children. And Jones had, in fact, long been a respected member of another local church.

Saying Yes, and then Saying No

But Joann Jones and Beverly Brubaker are unusual in another way as well: they are a lesbian couple, living openly in a conservative rural area. Jones had been married for 25 years unhappily before facing up to her proclivity, divorcing her husband and entering the relationship with Brubaker. And when Jones's former pastor learned of these changes, he cast her out of his congregation. Which is how the two women, both of whom consider themselves Christians, came to be looking for another religious home in the first place.

Ken Story knew these circumstances, but did not hesitate before answering yes, of course, they would be welcome in the church; and the two women, along with their children, have been attending West Elkton ever since. As part of his pastoral work, Ken Story visited their home numerous times, and came to know them well. This acquaintance led to a further request late last fall from Joann Jones's attorney, that Story appear as a witness on her behalf in a First Month, 1982 custody hearing. Story again agreed, expecting to tell the court of what he had seen in the foster home, namely a fine, well-run facility in which 13 very needy children receive excellent care.

That is, indeed, what he talked about first, and his testimony clearly impressed the judge, because Jones won the custody case. But when her former husband's attorney cross-examined Story, his questions were preoccupied with two main topics: Jones's sexual preference and what Story, as a Christian minister, thought of it. Finally, confronted with the point blank question, did he think homosexuality was a sin, Story felt obliged to answer plainly and candidly, "No." To which the lawyer snapped back, "Well, what kind of a Christian are you?"

Confrontations Over Conscience and Christianity

The judge ruled this last question irrelevant to the case before the court. But the question was by no means irrelevant among Friends. Ken Story's affirmation took the lid off all the tensions associated with the issue, and the reverberations are still being felt.

Pressure came simultaneously from within the Monthly and Yearly Meetings. Several local families, shocked at Story's statement and what they took to be its implications, demanded his ouster. There were also calls from within the upper levels of

Indiana Yearly Meeting for his dismissal, not only from West Elkton but from the Yearly Meeting as well. The grounds for these proposed actions were those mentioned earlier: that his views were incompatible with the proper interpretation of Scripture; and that tolerance of diversity among Indiana and West Elkton Friends did not extend to open homosexuals or those who supported them.

The issue came to a head in West Elkton at the business meeting in Second Month, 1982. The Church's Ministry and Membership Commission had labored for weeks with the dissenters, and then paid a special visit to Jones and Brubaker, specifically to thresh with them how they reconciled their lesbian relationship with their Christian identification. Their responses left the committee strongly moved, and solidly behind keeping Story as pastor. But when their recommendation was overwhelmingly approved by the Monthly Meeting, about a dozen members left the church in protest.

At the Yearly Meeting level the outcome was both more simple and more complex: more simple because no action against Ken Story was taken, nor, reportedly, is any action now contemplated. But this outcome was more complex in that it involved the fending off by the Yearly Meeting committee structure of attempts to have Story's ministerial status revoked, and a Yearly Meeting policy statement condemning homosexuality as sin based on certain Scriptural passages presented to the Yearly Meeting next month. Such a statement was in fact adopted by the Yearly Meeting Ministry and membership Commission, but was rejected by the Administrative Council, and thus is not scheduled to come before the Yearly Meeting sessions. What all this means, in sum, is that the issues have been left unresolved.

A Continuing Source of Difficulty for Indiana

That these issues remain unresolved is hardly surprising. They have been so difficult for Indiana Yearly Meeting that in 1978 a major conflict erupted on the floor of its annual sessions over whether an informal panel discussion of the topic could even be held, unless it began from the premise that homosexuality was indeed condemned as a sin by the Bible, and the discussion was to be mainly taken up with how to "redeem" homosexuals from their condition. The workshop was finally held, but was so tumultuous and embittering that of the four panelists who took part, only one remains in the Yearly Meeting four years later.

In the meantime, there are local citizens around West Elkton who believe that a lesbian couple should not operate a publicly-licensed facility, and have demanded, so far unsuccessfully, that the state revoke their foster home license. Despite this continuing opposition, the women say they feel even more at home among West Elkton Friends.

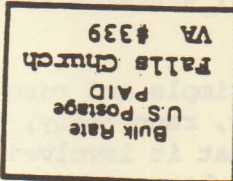
A Set of Issues That Will Not Go Away

Perhaps the controversy in West Elkton will quiet down for awhile, but it could easily flare up again over the matter of membership. Should either or both of the women ask to join the Meeting, there are those at the Yearly Meeting level who feel that Ken Story may have properly welcomed homosexuals to worship, but who would object to their formal acceptance as members. So West Elkton may not yet be out of the woods.

The point of this report, though, is not to single out Indiana Yearly Meeting for criticism; similar difficulties are widespread among American Friends. Rather, it is to point up the importance of acknowledging the underlying issues involved in our struggles over homosexuality, so they too can be dealt with. One such acknowledgement came from Hopewell Meeting in Indiana during the consideration of a proposed statement condemning homosexuality. The Hopewell minute read in part: "If the Yearly Meeting decides to condemn specific sins one by one, surely, in a spirit of fairness and generosity, it will want to condemn first those sins in which the largest number of Friends are involved and which present the greatest threat to society. With this in mind, is Indiana Yearly Meeting prepared to condemn our complicity in the nuclear arms race, which threatens the destruction of all God's creation, and is largely responsible for the fact that half the world's children are perpetually hungry? If the Yearly Meeting embarks on the condemnation of all sins, then who among us can in good conscience come forward to cast the first stone?"

These Friends speak my mind.

INSIDE: BEHIND THE ISSUE THAT MOST
DEEPLY DIVIDES AMERICAN FRIENDS



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
P.O. Box 1361
Ballleys Crossroads, VA 22041

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Happy birthday to us! It was 330 years ago this summer, in 1652, that a young itinerant preacher named George Fox came to the north country of England and began holding huge outdoor meetings, preaching for hours with remarkable effects on many of his hearers. Out of these mass meetings came the nucleus of the First Publishers of Truth. Nine years later, on 6/15/1661, the first sessions of New England Yearly Meeting were held—which makes it the oldest continuous religious body in America, except for the religions of Native Americans. And in this month 1840, a Philadelphia Friend named Lucretia Mott travelled to London to attend a world antislavery convention; but she was refused admission as a delegate because of her sex. The reaction to that rebuff became the beginning of the women's suffrage movement.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

When Plainness Was in Style

Quaker women for several generations dressed almost exclusively in grey and brown, in large part as a testimony against the expensive vagaries of fashion. But eventually, the British winds of fashion brought these very hues into vogue. During this time, according to tradition, a woman Friend went to buy some material for a cloak, and upon being shown bolts of grey and brown cloth, exclaimed: "Take away those gaudy colors! I prefer plain scarlet."

A Modest Proposal

"Martha, dost thou love me?" asked an ardent young Quaker suitor. "Why, Seth," came the guarded reply, "we are commanded to love one another by the Scriptures." "yes, Martha," Seth persisted, "but dost thee regard me with the feeling the world calls love?" Thus cornered, Martha replied, "I hardly know what to tell thee, Seth. I have greatly feared my heart was an erring one. I have tried to bestow love on all, but I have often falt that thee was getting considerably more than thy share."

--with thanks to Sessions's Laughter in Quaker Grey.

If, Friend Reader, thee is not a subscriber, will thee consider becoming one? And if thee is a subscriber already, will thee share this letter with others?
