



A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Eighteen

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Dear Friend,

Well, the Kenya Conference of Friends is now history, and early reports indicate it managed a degree of success that confounded the frequently-expressed fears of the skeptics (among which I was numbered) that it could not be brought off. Perhaps even more impressive was the fact that at this gathering Friends from all three of the currently alienated Kenyan Yearly Meetings were welcomed, circulated freely at the conference and took part as equals. I think it is fair to say that this was a first, and a very important precedent.

As the Friends who visited Kenya begin to share their experiences with the rest of us, one question that seems sure to come up is that of formal recognition of the two new Kenyan Yearly Meetings, Elgon and Southern, by other Quaker bodies. Elgon met in its tenth Yearly Meeting sessions just as the international conference gathered, and yet it is still not listed in any international directories of Quakerism. As has been reported here before, this is not an accident, but has been the result of a deliberate exclusion of Elgon from the world family of Friends. This exclusion has been, in my judgment, without any sound basis, and ought to end.

There may be opportunities to help end it which American Friends can grasp soon. One will come up when the Friends United Meeting General Board meets next month: it has received an application for recognition from Elgon. I very much hope the Board will accept this application, and formalize Elgon's visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the Quaker body whose missionaries first gathered its people into the Quaker fold. With such acceptance, Elgon could begin reporting to us through the pages of *Quaker Life*, which would give us an opportunity to learn more about this very interesting and growing body.

The other opportunity could be placed before individual Yearly Meetings. Why not ask their representative bodies to prepare minutes of greeting and congratulation to Elgon on its tenth anniversary, and expressions of friendship to the Southern group as well? Yearly Meetings need not wait for the approval of any other body; and those groups which have for so long neglected Elgon are now reliably reported to feel that this exclusion was a mistake, one which ought to be remedied as soon as possible. FUM and Yearly Meetings can help accomplish that.

I look forward to hearing more about the conference as reports are published in other Quaker journals.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

How do American Friends translate faith into practice, especially into standards of behavior? And what are these standards?

Amid the wide variety of our Yearly Meetings, there would seem to be little in the way of a universal pattern, either in decisionmaking processes or in outcome. But it may be instructive to examine some current efforts to answer these questions. Here I want to look at two.

The first case centers on my own hometown meeting, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this meeting, which is only a few blocks away from Harvard University, Friends have for over a year now been grappling with a proposed set of Advices, developed by a committee charged with revising the Book of Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting. New England Yearly Meeting, at the mature age of three hundred and twenty-two years, happens to be the oldest continuously-existing, non-Indian religious body in the United States. For most of its three centuries-plus, a list of Advices has been part of its written discipline. The Advices, which set out general standards of Quakerly conduct, had traditionally been printed alongside the Queries, as if to provide guidelines for the Queries' proper answers.

New Advices: Necessary or Unnecessary?

However, about a generation ago the Advices were deleted from the Faith and Practice by a revisions committee. Now a successor group has felt led to propose that they be redrafted and reintroduced into it. But Friends in Cambridge Meeting, and in other New England meetings, are not clear that they should be reintroduced. Cambridge Friends in particular have labored over the proposed Advices for several months--holding small group threshing sessions to share concerns, then attempting meld the various expressions into some common, and commonly acceptable, expressions. But they have not succeeded in finding unity as a result of this process.

There seem to be two kinds of obstacles to consensus in the meeting on the proposed Advices. The first springs from the wide range of styles of life present in the group, and the equally wide, even divergent personal values that go with them. This range is difficult to translate into coherent imperatives, because when a formulation is broad enough to include this variety, it also tends to be very vague, and unsatisfactory to those with more definite views. But there is also a significant number of Friends who have raised questions about the propriety of having Advices at all. They seem to feel that such a set of standards, however qualified, are unnecessary for Friends. The Queries, which pose questions, are sufficient, they contend, and Friends should be allowed and trusted to answer them according to their best leadings, supported by the group but not compelled by it.

Discussion, Discussion and More Discussion

When the proposed Advices came up during the Yearly Meeting sessions in Eighth Month, these concerns were shared in detail, by Friends from other meetings as well as Cambridge. The outcome was a predictable one: a decision was postponed, and New England Friends will continue to study and discuss the proposed Advices--both their specific contents and the question of having them at all--for another year.

The other case of putting faith into practice comes from Clifornia Yearly Meeting, which is at the other end of the continent from New England, and in some ways perhaps near the other end of the Quaker theological spectrum from it as well. Somewhat over a year ago, a concern arose in the Committee on Ministry of this pastoral Yearly Meeting as to whether it was permissible to record as pastors persons who had been divorced. In response to this concern a task force was set up to consider the matter and make recommendations.

Given the history and outlook of California Yearly Meeting, the task force took as the touchstone and measure of its work the interpretation of the Bible, particularly New Testament passages dealing with divorce and the qualifications of church leaders. They examined such passages as First Timothy Chapter Three ("Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife...."), Matthew 5:32 ("But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress...."), Mark 10:11, Luke 16: 18 and others, all of which would seem to argue strongly against divorce, particularly for those holding positions of responsibility in a Christian fellowship. And, again predictably, their recommendation was that, indeed, divorced persons should not be recorded as pastors in California Yearly Meeting. This recommendation was ratified by the Yearly Meeting's Spiritual Life Board and passed back to the Committee on Ministry. It was not presented to the Yearly Meeting for discussion at its sessions last Sixth Month.

Obvious Contrasts--And Some Less Obvious Parallels

The clarity of the California standard, and its base in an unquestioned Scriptural authority, would seem to present the sharpest contrast to New England's irresolution and unease with any set standards at all. Yet somewhat closer scrutiny suggests that the disparity may not be as sharp as it seems at first. For instance, the California policy will not apply to incumbent pastors; yet among this group there is at least one, of a senior and respected status, who has indeed been divorced. Further, the statement does not make clear whether the policy applies as well to the appointment of lay officials in the Yearly Meeting. (At least one major church does maintain a firm, though unwritten, practice of not having divorced persons serve as elders; but whether this is a common custom is not certain.)

For that matter, as one task force member pointed out, the Biblical passages on which the policy is based can be--and have been--interpreted in quite different ways by scholars of undoubted faith and erudition. Take First Timothy 3:2 quoted above, for example: Does "the husband of one wife" mean that he can have had only one spouse in a lifetime, or does it mean he should not have indulged in the common practice of polygamy which was permitted under the Old Testament Law? And would it also exclude a widower who had remarried? Does it also imply that "bishops" can only be male?

The task force members were not unaware of these exegetical difficulties. They clearly leaned hard on the "above reproach" language: "We felt it was proper to set the highest Biblical standards for pastors," was how another member explained it. He was careful to add that in doing so they did not mean to judge or condemn anyone who may have been divorced.

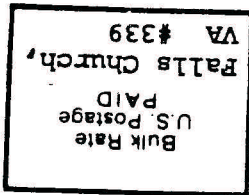
Consistent Ambiguity and Relativized Rules

On the other side, I am not so sure that the so far unshakable relativism of New England's discussion on Advices is all there is to its process. I also perceive a steadfastness in its laboring that points toward a sense of community underlying the divergence. And the patience with which the differences are being worked with is as true to the spirit of the New Testament as any specific exhortation.

On reflection, then, perhaps these two cases are not as utterly different as they seemed at first: a solid principle, that of patient bearing of one another's burdens in love, can be at least glimpsed in the welter of New England's diverse views on Advices and what role they should have. And there are substantial situational elements in both the California policy and its authoritative sources, not to speak of its application.

Does this comparison suggest that, different as New England and California Yearly Meetings are, they too may have something in common, if only a condition of finitude? That is a query to ponder, and to answer as one is led.

INSIDE: HOW DO QUAKERS SET STANDARDS
FOR THEMSELVES TODAY?
OR DO THEY?



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

On the first of this month in 1969, Drew Pearson died in Washington. Pearson was not only a world-famous muckraking columnist, but also a birthright and lifelong Friend. He served with distinction in one of the first AFSC units, rebuilding villages in Serbia. He contributed financially to Quaker projects, and in 1947 organized one of his own: the Friendship Train, a nationwide drive which collected 700 carloads of relief supplies for war-impooverished citizens of France and Italy. One could even say that his muckraking, dedicated to the exposure of hidden truth amid the disingenuous atmosphere of our national political life, exemplified a Friendly imperative. Certainly he was dedicated to the characteristic Friendly concerns of peace and equality throughout his long career.

At the same time, in the course of writing seven columns a week for over 30 years, Pearson left ample evidence of his portion of human failings and corruption. One of his most serious faults was a frequent falling short of strict veracity in print. When a U.S. Senator denounced Pearson as "a natural born liar, a liar by profession, a liar for a living, a liar in the daytime, a liar in the nighttime..." the charge was considerably exaggerated but not, alas, wholly inaccurate. Yet possibly the most disreputable episode in his career came before the column, in the early 1930s. Then, down on his luck, Pearson accepted a job as the undercover head of a nationwide campaign to promote the Irish Sweepstakes lottery in the U.S. He did his job very well, flouting in the process not only federal laws against lotteries, but also one of the most venerable Quaker testimonies. After launching his column, Pearson managed to conceal his involvement in the Sweepstakes campaign until his death.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

Here I must enter a correction. Last month I relayed a bit of Quaker history about two of William Penn's father's sisters and their venture in baking. However, I have since been advised, via the Southeastern Yearly Meeting newsletter, that the lady Friends in question actually kept cockatoos, which were known far and wide as The Parrots of Penn's Aunts.

Further, I want to scotch the rumor that a visitor to the Gathering of Friends at Slippery Rock Pennsylvania last summer, after observing the generous meals set before the Quakers gathered there for a week, turned to one of us and said: "Now I understand what FGC stands for: its Friends Getting Chubby." There is no truth to that story whatever.
