

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Twenty-three

Second Month, 1983

Dear Friend,

That persistently troubling issue of homosexuality is coming up again, all around. Not only in Friends United Meeting, as reported inside, but also in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which will have on its agenda this spring a minute proposing to cut off its contributions to FCNL because of FCNL's lack of an explicit policy supporting gay rights. Many readers will recall our earlier reports of turmoil in Iowa Yearly Meeting, which did result in a cutoff of contributions to the Quaker lobby for, among other things, precisely the opposite reason, that it did not have an explicit policy *against* gay rights.

Oh well, that's Quaker Life, 1983. My own guess is that the proposal, though deeply felt by its authors, will not be approved. Certainly it evokes the same doubts I had about Iowa's action: FCNL has no position on gay rights, pro or con, because there is no unity among American Friends on the issue and FCNL respects that state of disunity. For my part, it seems very dubious to penalize a Quaker body for following Quaker practice in its policymaking. In this area FCNL sets a fine example.

Turning to a subject on which there is more (but not, alas, universal) unity, namely peace, it is time to announce our second Young Friends Peace Poster Contest. Details are contained on the flyer enclosed with this issue. A new wrinkle this year is that I have expanded it to include a Quaker Peace Bumper Sticker Contest as well, and increased the number of prizes. If you think this would be of interest to Young Friends in your Meeting or Church, by all means spread the word. The deadline has also been set back two weeks to allow more time for entries.

And I cannot forebear to mention that in the First Month 10, 1983 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, we got some free publicity, in a report on a Catholic Trappist monastery west of Washington. A monk there was explaining to a visitor the wide range of people who had come to the monastery for retreats--even Quakers, he asserted. As evidence, the priest fished in his pocket and pulled out--what else but a button that said "Has Thee Hugged a Quaker Today?" I wonder where he got it?

Finally, Friends who were interested in the account of the work of Herbert Nicholson on behalf of interned Japanese-Americans in World War Two may want to read more about his fascinating and uplifting career in his autobiography, *Comfort All Who Mourn*. The book is available from him, at 1639 Locust St., Pasadena CA 91106, for \$5.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

THE FUM TRIENNIAL: CAUGHT IN A QUAKER CROSSFIRE

Trouble is brewing between California Yearly Meeting (CYM) and Friends United Meeting (FUM) over the issue of whether homosexuality can be discussed at the 1984 FUM Triennial. That Triennial is set to be held in southern California, at CYM's invitation. But CYM has served notice on FUM that if the topic of homosexuality is allowed to be discussed there, CYM's invitation will be cancelled. This condition was laid down in a letter sent to FUM shortly after the CYM mid-year conference last month. FUM's response will probably come from its board meetings, set for Third Month 21-23 in Richmond, Indiana. If it is not satisfactory, CYM's Board of Administration will take "appropriate action," as one CYM official put it, most likely to withdraw the invitation to host the Triennial.

Several factors lay behind the CYM ultimatum: one is the memory of the 1977 Wichita Conference of Friends, when the same question caused a crisis which almost aborted the whole gathering. Another is a deep fear, often expressed in near-panicked tones, of a violent invasion of the Triennial by "outside groups" of militant gays from the Los Angeles area. Such an invasion would, it is feared, attract the attention of the international press, which will be gathered in the area for the 1984 Summer Olympics, and turn the Triennial into an international spectacle. I was told by several CYM Friends that threats of this sort had been made by gay Quaker groups.

Facing The Fearful Facts About FUM Friends

Still another factor is a heavy current of ambivalence some CYM Friends feel regarding FUM, as a body which includes some yearly meetings which do not share their strong evangelical approach to the Bible and Christianity. From this perspective, homosexuality is nothing but an abomination, and anyone who says otherwise is propagating abomination. For many in CYM, there is simply nothing more to be said, or heard, on the subject.

Unfortunately for such CYM Friends, FUM is, and always has been, a very mixed bag of Yearly Meetings, in which there is a wide range of views about homosexuality (and just about everything else). Indeed, one of FUM's more distinguished former presiding clerks, Tom Bodine, recently made public his homosexuality. During the past two years discussions of this topic have occurred at several FUM yearly meetings; some were quiet and little-noticed (as at my own Baltimore YM), while others were extended and difficult (as in New England and Indiana).

Responding to this broad concern and diversity, the FUM Program Committee last spring proposed that one Triennial workshop focus on ministry to homosexual Friends' families. This proposal was dropped after CYM representatives vehemently objected. FUM sources suggest that the committee does not plan to bring forward any similar request at its meeting next month. Thus, at one level, CYM's condition is likely to be met.

Limiting Friends' Freedom Is Asking For Trouble

Yet inaction by the FUM planners will not resolve the problem. Besides whatever is formally planned in advance, there is also the matter of ad hoc discussion during the Triennial, and items to come before the business session. At the 1981 Triennial, a request for such an ad hoc discussion was made by several delegates, including myself. This proposal was initially accepted as routine, then denied after consultations with, among others, the CYM representatives. Meanwhile, many other similar discussions were routinely permitted.

Thus the question arises as to whether the CYM letter means that *no* discussion, preplanned or ad hoc, must be permitted. CYM officials I interviewed were not entirely clear in their answers; but they admitted that an influential segment of their membership did indeed intend it to be interpreted to exclude any discussion whatever.

Given the number of FUM yearly meetings grappling with this issue, it is doubtful that all mention of it can be avoided at the 1984 Triennial. And if delegates arrive facing an arbitrary limit to their discussion, it takes no great prescience to foresee difficulties. For beyond the specific topic, there is the more fundamental issue of whether such conditions

are an acceptable way for a Friends body to function. It is, to say the least, a procedure at sharp variance with our history, particularly the formative period most of us look back on with such pride. The first generation of Friends included tens of thousands who suffered prison, and hundreds who gave their lives, precisely to win the freedom to speak and meet to follow their leadings and concerns--almost all of which, it need hardly be noted, were controversial to say the least. How is that heritage and tradition to be squared with a gathering of Friends where certain topics are declared off limits in advance, because the range of Friends' views might stray beyond those of some in one member body? Moreover, this would be a very unsettling precedent: If CYM can unilaterally forbid the mention of some topic at FUM, why can't other bodies rule out what they don't like? A great many other issues among us also evoke strong feelings: peace, women's issues, FCNL, AFSC, even the Bible. Can FUM afford to help open such a can of worms among us? In any event, as Wichita showed, those who would foreclose quiet, earnest exploration of controversial matters among diverse groups of Friends have more often succeeded only in undermining the quiet and Friendly context in which orderly and fruitful explorations can occur.

Is FUM Heading For A Repeat of Wichita?

All the unhappy ingredients for a fiasco surpassing Wichita are present and simmering in the FUM-CYM confrontation. But there are also several reasons to hope that the Triennial could come off with no untoward incidents. Among these factors are the following:

* *First*, and perhaps most important, there are in fact no "outside groups" of militant gay Quakers threatening to invade or disrupt the Triennial. No one I talked to in CYM had any first-hand knowledge of such threats, only rumors from very vague sources; the most concrete reference I heard was to a "gay Yearly Meeting in New York," which does not exist. The Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, an informal association including many FUM Friends, has discussed no such plans; indeed, they would be entirely out of character. The repetition of such baseless reports without careful checking does CYM Friends no credit in this ongoing encounter. *I have checked the rumors; they are false.*

* *Second*, there is no demand for a preplanned Triennial workshop on the topic by gay or other Friends. If to have the issue unlisted in the Triennial's formal program would ease the minds of some CYM Friends, this very likely can be done. Further, to have any informal discussion limited to FUM Friends does not present a problem; there is plenty of diversity among them to make for a rich and challenging sampling of Friends' views.

* *Third*, the fact that this issue is surfacing now, 18 months before the Triennial, is a major difference from Wichita, where some Friends felt ambushed. FUM has plenty of time to work out some acceptable arrangement, or failing that to move the Triennial.

* *Fourth*, there is much good will among some key CYM leaders, who wish to head off any unnecessary difficulties, as there is among many who want the chance to discuss the issue at the Triennial. Let us hope this good will is not squandered.

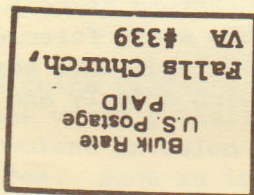
Challenges to CYM And FUM

Even so, it is a fair guess that this matter will not be resolved without some difficult sessions, particularly in CYM. The diversity of views in FUM is simply not going to go away. Thus CYM is being challenged to come to terms with its internal ambivalence about it: Can it live with a body as varied as FUM inescapably is? There are voices in CYM who would answer that query with a firm negative. Are they to call its tune?

And for FUM, the challenge is to accommodate the legitimate concerns of CYM for an orderly gathering while preserving the hard-won liberty of Friends to speak and meet as they are led. In many yearly meetings, this liberty is not a problem, but a venerable custom and a source of Quakerly pride. FUM can ill afford to abandon it.

What ought to happen, in my view, is what happened at the Evangelical Friends Alliance conference in 1981: among the 50-plus workshops was one on Ministering to Homosexuals. I attended it; the session was quiet but intense; more than one view was expressed; and when it ended, it was over, with no hoopla or further notice. After all, even gay Friends have a variety of concerns; it is not the case that they, or anyone else, wants this topic to be the center of the Triennial's attention. Let it be what it can be--one serious Quaker concern among others, and it will not become the occasion for a crisis.

INSIDE: WILL THE FUM TRIENNIAL
GET CAUGHT IN A QUAKER CROSSFIRE?



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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

In Second Month, 1869, President U.S. Grant reported to Congress on his policy toward American Indians, then just being placed in reservations: "The Society of Friends is well known as having succeeded in living in peace with the Indians in the early settlement of Pennsylvania, while their white neighbors of other sects in other sections were constantly embroiled. They are also known for their opposition to all strife, violence and war, and are generally noted for their strict integrity and fair dealings. These considerations induced me to give the management of a few reservations of Indians to them...." Quakers ran numerous reservations throughout Grant's two terms, and a few until some years later. How did this experiment turn out? Grant said, "The result has proven most satisfactory." the Quaker historian Kelsey agreed, but more guardedly: "On the whole, the effort was crowned with a fine success. The Indians, many of them wild and warlike, or filthy and debased, made remarkable progress toward civilization, especially in the early years when Friends were unhampered by adverse political influences...." Ah, politics. A more contemporary judgment, in a new book by Clyde A Milner II, *With Good Intentions: Quaker Work Among the Pawnees, Otos and Omahas in the 1870s*, was summed up thus in the *Christian Century*: "Generally the policy was a bust....Certainly, one would have thought, Quakers of all people could have bridged gaps between tribes and factions, between whites and Native Americans. No luck." Ah well; no doubt Friends did their best.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Getting With the Program

A somewhat nearsighted Friend of the old school came into a Philadelphia computer store not long ago and said to the manager, "Friend, I wish to purchase one of thy Quaker computers."

"My what?" came the reply. "We don't carry any Quaker computers. Is that a new brand?"

"Why, of course thee carries them," insisted the Friend. "I saw the sign in thy window." The Quaker pointed. "Right over there; the one that says, 'Our computers are for Friendly Users.'"