

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Thirty

Ninth Month 1983

Dear Friend,

I recently read a biography of John Bright, the great British Quaker statesman. In it is quoted a remark Bright made in his late middle years, that after a certain point in one's life it seems to "rain death" all around. This melancholy comment spoke very much to my condition, because while I am not yet as old as he was then, that is how it has seemed during much of the past year. In just the past several weeks, for instance, my own Yearly Meeting has lost several longtime, devoted members. Among these I feel one loss very keenly, that of David Scull. David was, in my opinion, a model Quaker, a person whose life and work have left quiet but unmistakable marks all around him. I'm thinking here not only of the grand causes he supported, and the organizations, too numerous to count, of which he was a pillar and, often enough, a founder (they include our Langley Hill Monthly Meeting); there is also his impact on our local community and indeed the entire state of Virginia. His role in witnessing against the massive resistance to desegregation by the state government, for instance, was one for the record books (and for "This Month in Quaker History", where it was discussed in Issue #27, 6/83). But his life was also one which was lived quietly and modestly; he was always available when I wanted counsel, and was an early, loyal and frequently-commenting subscriber to this newsletter.

Even David's involvement in the subject of this month's article was an exemplary one. I recall a Yearly Meeting session a few years back when a group of gay and lesbian Friends sponsored an informal tea as an opportunity for discussion of issues related to homosexuality and Friends. David was one who was at that time very dubious about the whole matter. Yet he took this attitude down to the tea, sat down and talked frankly with the others there about his concerns at some length. I doubt that this dialogue changed his views radically (though I did detect a distinct softening); the point is that he was willing to forego the convenience of sniping at a distance for the risk of friendly confrontation. This is not always an easy thing to undertake, God knows. And God knows, too, how much I shall miss David Scull.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

PS. The topic of this issue, a controversy in Friends United Meeting over the implications of discussion of homosexuality at its Triennial next summer, was also the subject of issue #23, 2/83. This issue is still available, at the back issue rate of \$1.50 per copy.

FUM AT THE CROSSROADS

For more than a year, Friends United Meeting (FUM) has been involved in an intense, if quiet struggle over the course of its Triennial, which is to be held in Los Angeles next Seventh Month. This struggle, which may well shape FUM's future as a Friends association, began when the Triennial planning committee proposed to include among the workshops at the gathering one on ministering to families of homosexuals. California Yearly Meeting, which is to host the Triennial, objected vehemently to the idea. As Keith Sarver, recently-retired CYM Superintendent who was their spokesman recalled it, "When the issue of a possible discussion of homosexuality at the 1984 sessions was first presented to the General Board of FUM in the spring of 1982, I stated at that time that such a discussion could not be on the agenda and that if it were provided for the invitation of CYM would be withdrawn." In the face of such opposition the workshop plan was dropped. But later CYM went even further, insisting that no discussions whatever of homosexuality be permitted at the Triennial, reiterating that if FUM did not accept this condition the Yearly Meeting would withdraw its invitation.

Many Friends were troubled by CYM's action, including not a few who hold no brief for homosexuality. They doubted whether it was proper for a host Yearly Meeting to attempt to lay down such limitations on Friends at a gathering like FUM. Freedom of discussion and seeking is after all a tradition in most YMs, and is a right which early Friends suffered much to achieve. When these Friends shared their concerns, their uneasiness was echoed by others.

A Flurry of Minutes

By the end of this past summer, three YMs, Baltimore, New York and Canada, had adopted minutes dealing with the CYM-FUM matter. A fourth, New England, adopted a "Minute of Affirmation" which supported as "a Christian principle" the right of gays and lesbians to full membership in the Society, adding that the Friends community was "enriched" by this diversity. This minute was forwarded to FUM, along with Friends General Conference and the Friends World Committee on Consultation, as an expression of concern.

The Canadian minute, however, laid out the concern regarding the Triennial in the strongest and plainest terms. This statement merits quotation in full:

FUM TRIENNIAL 1984---8/20/83

As a member of FUM, we deeply value the opportunities we have of working together under God's guidance. We have learned that a Yearly Meeting has indicated an intention to withdraw its invitation to host FUM's Triennial 1984 in California, if discussion of homosexuality is permitted.

We are disturbed by the attempt of California Yearly Meeting to control the choice of topics for discussion and by the response of the executives of FUM's General Board in apparently yielding to this pressure. We particularly deplore the fact that discussion was cut off, and that the issue of control was not laid openly before our delegates.

We recognize that homosexuality is a deeply sensitive issue, one which causes trauma to many Friends. When faced with this, meetings of all persuasions struggle to seek God's guidance.

We respect the depth of conviction that Friends hold in their interpretation of Scripture and we long for open and tender communication which will increase understanding.

We believe that the Triennial can provide opportunity to continue the search together and we ask FUM's General Board to give full consideration to this matter at their meeting in October of this year.

Our Yearly Meeting unites in desiring that there be no restrictions placed on topics discussed at the Triennial in 1984. We have confidence that wherever Friends gather they will work and worship together in the spirit of God's love. We look for-

ward with joy to the Triennial in California and to participation by all member meetings in it.

We have faith in openness as an essential foundation to unity.

That last sentence, in my judgment, points up the underlying issue in this controversy, which is less homosexuality than pluralism. FUM is in fact a very diverse association of Quakers, including under its umbrella everything from liberal humanist unprogrammed meetings to fundamentalist pastoral churches. Yet its rhetoric and organizational programming have long been largely confined within a pastoral and evangelical mode. It is as if there was an unspoken understanding in place, whereby the (for some, uncomfortable) fact of the diversity in FUM's ranks would be tolerated by the more evangelically-oriented groups, as long as it did not have to be formally admitted and faced up to. This makeshift status quo has made it very difficult for FUM to address many issues, even some which are traditional for most Friends' bodies. For instance, it was not until the 1981 Triennial that FUM was able to accept a minute supporting conscientious objectors.

Distinguishing Dialogue from Heresy

When it comes to homosexuality, however, this status quo is almost by definition made untenable. From the more evangelical perspective, the talk in the Canadian minute of free discussion on such an issue misses the point. For this group the Bible, as they interpret it, is authoritative, and by their reading the teaching of Scripture is unmistakably that homosexuality is an abomination. Hence there is nothing to discuss, except how to combat it. The kind of acceptance offered to acknowledged homosexuals by New England YM's "Minute of Affirmation," for example, cannot be seen as an attempt to "continue the search," but rather as out and out heresy. And to call such acceptance a "Christian principle" is tantamount to blasphemy. Keith Sarver summed up his reaction bluntly: "Yes, we should attempt to have a ministry to homosexuals, just as we should to murderers, alcoholics and prostitutes. And I might also add pharisees. But that is not the concern behind the request for a discussion of the subject. I believe the concern is the attempt to gain acceptance without change. I do not believe we can set aside the teaching of Scripture to allow for the continuing practice of sin."

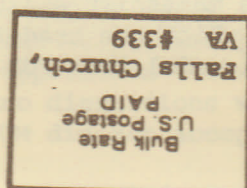
Friend Sarver is, of course, correct in his estimate that some FUM Friends are seeking approbation of homosexuality. The New England minute is coming rather close to corporate acceptance of such approbation. Sarver is also correct when he asserts that "It is only when one questions the authority of Scripture that any such concept can be entertained." At least, he is correct that such a notion is outside the bounds of his view of the authority and meaning of the Bible. And it is likewise true that there is a wide range of views in FUM regarding the place and meaning of Scripture.

The Inescapability of Diversity

What is now to be determined, however, is whether these views, embodied in CYM's statements, are to override and preempt this diversity, and keep it closeted behind FUM's public veil of evangelical rhetoric. Yet whatever value this fiction of uniformity may have had in the past, it is hard to see how it can be sustained any longer. With four YMs openly asserting their right to diversity, it seems inescapable that if some topic is excluded by fiat from the Triennial's informal sessions, it is sure to break into the formal business sessions, as delegates protest such arbitrary treatment. The results of such a confrontation for FUM are neither easy to predict nor pleasant to contemplate.

The obvious time to head off such an unfortunate development is at the FUM General Board meeting next month. California Yearly Meeting's executive body, the Administrative Council, will meet shortly before that. I for one hope the group will be able at long last to accede to the reality of FUM's diversity, and send delegates to the Board who are sensitive and conciliatory. I especially hope there will be no more of the baseless rumor-mongering about conspiracies for militant gay disruptions of the Triennial, of the sort which so sullied CYM's earlier consideration of the issue. FUM should be on the threshold of a historic transition into being an affirmatively diverse Quaker communion. Let us pray the transition can be made soon, and in a quiet and Friendly manner.

INSIDE: FRIENDS UNITED MEETING'S
COMING HOUR OF DECISION



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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Ninth Month is a weighty one in the Quaker calendar. For one thing, back in 1877 first appeared one of the most widely-known symbols of Friends that there ever was. I am referring, of course, to the Quaker Oats man, registered by an Ohio company that is now a giant multinational. In 1915 a Yearly Meeting went to court in an effort to stop the company, which was not Quaker-owned, from using the name and the image; but they lost.

Hardly fifty years earlier, though, another important cultural event associated with Quakerism occurred. This was, on 9/27/1825, the introduction of the very first passenger railroad line, by a British Friend and industrialist named Edward Pease. The train ran from Auckland to Stockton and carried six wagons of coal and one of passengers. It was called, what else, the Quaker Line.

Last but not least, it was early in Ninth Month, 1643 that a young Englishman named George Fox felt God calling him to leave his home. Fox obeyed, and began a four-year pilgrimage which ended in 1647 when he heard a voice tell him that "there is one, even Christ Jesus, which can speak to thy condition." The impact of that experience is still being felt, in almost as many places as you can buy Quaker Oats.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

In my last issue I appealed for more Yearly Meeting humor. There hasn't exactly been a flood of responses (it hasn't, overall, been a very funny year). But here are two more, one old and one new.

The first involves Raymond Wilson, the esteemed longtime executive secretary of FCNL. Many years ago, he was speaking to a midwestern Yearly Meeting on the topic of government support for birth control, which was then very controversial. After his talk, a woman Friend came up to him and contested his advocacy of birth control, saying, among other things, "I am the youngest of six children, and where would I be if my parents had practiced birth control?"

Friend Wilson replied, as always, calmly. "But madam," he said evenly, "neither I nor FCNL has ever suggested that this policy should be applied retroactively."

The other item comes from New England Yearly Meeting's sessions of this past Eighth Month. It was in the form of a business card which was sold there, and which Friends can expect to see soon on buttons and a postcard. The business card read simply: *I am a Quaker. In case of emergency, please be quiet.*
