

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Thirty-Five

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Second Month, 1984

Dear Friend,

It is wise to be cautious when speaking of such matters, but I *think* my ordeal by computer is over, at least for the present. All that was involved, I thought, was the transfer of my letter mailing list, only a few hundred names, from one machine to another. That was over four months ago. Now, finally, it looks as if the transition has really been negotiated. One important effect of getting the list straightened out was that I discovered at least twoscore readers whose renewals of their subscriptions had not made it onto the disc. This was both an embarrassment and a relief: an embarrassment at the poor service being offered loyal readers, but a relief that what appeared to be an alarming drop in my circulation was not the case at all.

In any event, it has been a humbling experience, one which leads me to repeat that if you have not been receiving issues when you think you should have, please let me know and we will make amends. Further, it bears repeating also that bulk mail is commonly delivered only about 85-90% of the time. This means that in the normal course of events, each reader could expect to miss one issue per year due to failures in the postal system. We will be happy to send out replacement copies when needed.

Turning to our subject, this month we look at an important Quaker publication. But before we get to that, we must speak of another, *Friends Journal*, offering congratulations to Vint Deming, who is its new editor. Under his late predecessor, Olcott Sanders, *Friends Journal* became a much better magazine, one which was rapidly becoming a strong competitor even in my own fields of harder news, exploration of issues, Quaker history and humor. I expect it to maintain these high standards under Vint's stewardship, so that I will have to work harder to justify *A Friendly Letter's* existence. That's fine; the more good competition, the better for Friends.

One other note: This issue is getting done very late in Second Month, primarily because of the weightiness of its subject matter. Contrary to some reports, I do not relish the role of Quaker carping critic, and found myself procrastinating when it came time to put this issue on paper. Yet the concerns voiced here have been developing for some time. They have been raised privately with the relevant parties without result. And as time passes they become, in my judgment, more important to address. Thus I am undertaking to raise them, in hopes something constructive can result from this leading.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

QUAKER LIFE: WHY NOT THE BEST?

I'm worried about *Quaker Life*. It ought to be the best Quaker publication around, but it isn't. It should be the best because it's the official monthly journal of Friends United Meeting, and as the association with the broadest range of Yearly Meetings, FUM has in recent years been the focus of some of the most intensive and fruitful threshing of the key internal issues facing Friends today. Moreover, this process shows no signs of slowing down.

Yet much of this creative ferment has been consistently missing from the pages of *Quaker Life*. Furthermore, there has been a consistent lack of comprehensiveness in its coverage of Quaker and FUM concerns which amounts to a kind of unadmitted discrimination against substantial segments of the FUM constituency.

Let me be more specific about what I mean. On the first point, coverage of intra-FUM affairs, two examples should suffice. One relates to the ongoing difficulties within East Africa Yearly Meeting, conflicts which resulted in the sending of rival delegations to the 1981 FUM Triennial, and which may well result in a difficult controversy over recognition of new breakaway African YMs at the 1984 Triennial this summer. *Quaker Life* did not publish a single word about these developments until they had been reported in other Quaker publications, although the facts had been well-known to the magazine and FUM staff for several years. Furthermore, in maintaining this silence, *Quaker Life*, like FUM, in no way played a neutral role: its coverage of African Quakers was totally slanted to one side in the ongoing struggle. In the last two years, while admitting the fact of problems in EAYM, the magazine's reports have been very sketchy and allusive, rather than detailed and informative. (The only exception to this was a report in the 12/82 issue on the FUM General Board's decision to recommend acceptance of FUM membership for the two new breakaway YMs in Kenya.) Triennial delegates who wish to be well-versed about this matter, which they may call upon to deliberate, will still have to look elsewhere for useful background material. (One place they can look is in our issues on the topic, #s 4, 16, and 32.)

Hear No Controversy, Speak No Controversy

More recently, FUM has been through an extended contention over an attempt to limit discussions of controversial topics at its upcoming Triennial. This conflict reached a culmination in 10/83, when the FUM General Board decisively overcame such efforts, and affirmed FUM's commitment to openness in its processes, no matter how troublesome the issues involved. (This struggle was described at length in our issues #23 and 30.)

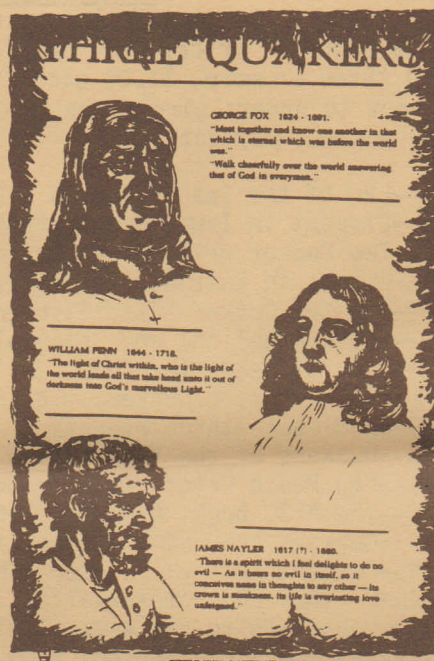
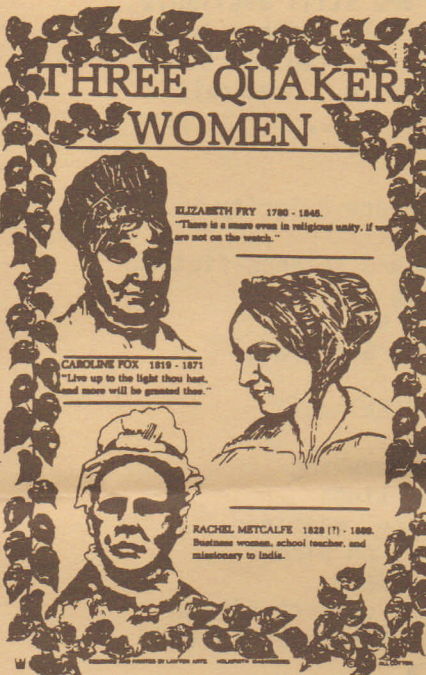
Not a word about this protracted dispute surfaced in *Quaker Life* until the 12/83 issue, when the Board's two minutes on the subject were mentioned in a longer report on the Board's meetings. And this account, astonishingly, managed to summarize these historic actions without *ever* mentioning: A. the specific issues addressed in the minutes, B. the course of events which had produced them, or C. the extensive discussion in the Board sessions from which they emerged.

In short, *Quaker Life* "reported" on the Board action without meaningfully informing readers about it. To one familiar with the background of the Board's action, this "report" concealed as much or more than it disclosed. Reading it left me, as a Quaker journalist, feeling embarrassed and ashamed. FUM Friends have the right, as a body of Truth-seeking and truth-witnessing persons, to expect and demand fuller and more candid reporting than that in their official organ, on everything, and *certainly* on their own association's affairs.

A Policy of Partial Impartiality

The reason for this muffled, incomplete reportage on crucial FUM issues appears to be a policy of the Friends United Press Board, *Quaker Life*'s supervising body, that the magazine may not deal with any topics which in its view could become divisive of the FUM community. This policy has been cited by the staff to me and others when concerns over the inadequacy of its coverage were raised privately. It was reiterated by FUPress Board Clerk R. Max Rees, a Quaker pastor in North Carolina, in a 1981 letter to me. The magazine, Rees

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said, has "a responsibility to build a sense of community among our constituency. This means, to us, that although we will deal at times with controversial subjects, as we have in the past, we will not wish to become controversial."

The magazine staff has loyally adhered to this policy as interpreted by the FUPress Board. Such loyalty appears to account, for instance, for the studied vagueness of the report on the General Board's minutes on openness, since one minute actually mentioned the word homosexuality, which has indeed "become controversial" within FUM. It would similarly explain its lengthy, biased silence on the troubles in Africa.

The shortcomings of the FUPress Board's policy ought to be immediately apparent. First is the fact that, as we have seen, it makes for unreliable and incomplete reporting of even the parent body's official business, in the one place where FUM Friends have a right to expect accuracy and completeness. Secondly, it makes for sanitized and insipid feature writing and editing, which regrettably have filled too many of *Quaker Life*'s issues. Third, and perhaps worst, such a policy is disingenuous at its heart: just how can you deal with controversy without becoming controversial? I can speak from plenty of experience and say that you can't. In a body as diverse as FUM, such a distinction can only be applied in a differential manner: catering to the sensibilities and concerns of some readers while overlooking or suppressing the concerns of others. And in *Quaker Life*, that is just what has happened.

The Missing Links in Quaker Life's Quaker Life

Let me be more specific. Not since late 1981, for instance, has there been an article in *Quaker Life* presenting what can be called the "Universalist" theme in current Quaker experience in other than a critical way. Yet there are no less than six FUM YMs in which such an outlook, if not predominant, is certainly heavily represented; and I have run into it in several others. This reality of FUM's religious diversity would, however, be all but unknown to a *Quaker Life* reader who had no other contact with FUM.

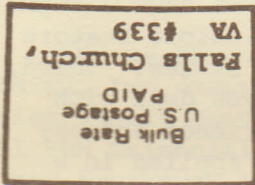
A preeminent example of this attitude in practice came in the 1-2/84 issue's series of articles on the recent Consultation on Membership held in Richmond, Indiana. All these articles emphasized the necessity of a Christian commitment as a basis for membership in the Society, and most decried the range of opinion on this matter among Friends today. Reading these articles, some of which pointed straight back toward the old Orthodox habit of wholesale disownments for "unsoundness," what are universalistically-inclined Friends supposed to think? It's no wonder I worry about *Quaker Life*. A publication so slanted toward one end of the FUM spectrum is not building that community; it is sowing the seeds of disunion. And the strained effort not to "become controversial" succeeds only at the cost of pretending that the strongly-held views of whole segments of its constituency do not deserve mention. This avoids controversy only by embracing unadmitted discrimination. If this matter involved employment or housing, *Quaker Life* would be facing discrimination lawsuits, with good reason.

A New Policy Is At Hand

After fending off an effort to impose a similarly-blinkered policy on its Triennial, the FUM General Board wisely minuted a commitment to "examine together any and every aspect of our existence--personally sensitive or socially distressing--in prayerful and careful discussion and deliberation." *Quaker Life* described this statement as a reaffirmation of Friends' historic commitment to openness and the possibility of continuing revelation. But as far as the magazine is concerned, such an approach would represent a strikingly new departure, one long overdue.

Such a change of approach may not be far off. For one thing, the General Board minute on openness, though evoked by plans for the Triennial, was phrased as a general policy. Thus it clearly supercedes the myopic approach now mandated by the FUPress Board's guideline. As the new policy comes into play, changes in *Quaker Life* should be noticeable and all to the good. For as I said in the beginning, FUM is the arena in which much of the most important internal Quaker threshing and growing is being done. And a publication which accurately reflected and assisted in this process could easily be the best Quaker publication around.

INSIDE: THE TROUBLE WITH
QUAKER LIFE



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

Twenty-one years ago this month, a group of eleven British Friends published an essay on which they had worked for six years, entitled *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*. It is not clear now whether they knew what a bombshell they were loosing on the Society of Friends and society in general. But within a year their small booklet had been through six printings, and had been noted in the press on both sides of the Atlantic. It had also evoked fierce criticism from Evangelical circles, who took its assertion that "*The Christian standard of chastity should not be measured by a physical act, but should be a standard of human relationship, applicable within marriage as well as outside it*" (their italics) as a declaration of war on the Old Morality. In a preface to the second edition, the authors took note of this "vehement condemnation arising from the belief that a rigid moral pattern of conduct is an inherent part of Christianity." Their response was to note that their group was originally formed as part of an effort to help deal with the questions and problems of young people, and that "If such a pattern were adequate to help bewildered men and women...our group need never have met." Needless to say, the issues these Friends addressed are still very much with us two decades later, and are almost as controversial as ever.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Diligent for Truth

Friend Scattergood, an upright but stern Quaker shopkeeper, passed away. That evening he showed up at the gates of Hell, insisting that he be allowed to speak to the landlord. Satan himself opened the gates and, recognizing the visitor's plain attire said, "Scattergood, what is thee doing here? Thee's supposed to be in Heaven."

"Yes, said the shopkeeper, "I know where I'm supposed to be, but before I go I want to collect a few old debts."

"I see," replied the devil. "But thee's dead. What's thee doing here?"

"Well I'll tell thee," answered the Quaker. "Every time I tried to collect these debts while I was alive people told me that this is where I should go."
