

A Friendly Letter

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Dear Friend,

There's bad news this month: both Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting are in dire financial straits. Both associations had faced hard times a couple of years back, then seemed to pull even last year, and I for one thought they were on the road to financial soundness. But no; giving is substantially down to both, and each has been forced into unpleasant measures: FGC staff were given notice last month that they may face layoffs soon (though several extra donations since then have staved off that outcome for another few months); FUM's General Board sliced one of its most promising programs, the Quaker Volunteer Witness, entirely out of its budget for this year and next, leaving it to find its own funding if it is to survive; other areas were also cut back.

This new crunch is bringing to pass something I have often wished for (see Issue #33), namely the puncturing of the hoary liberal Quaker taboo against open, vigorous fundraising. In fact, at the Baltimore Yearly Meeting spring representative meeting, where I learned of the shortages, the situation regarding FGC was presented by George Webb of Stony Run Meeting in Baltimore, who is chair of FGC's Central Committee; and when George finished, he flat out challenged all of us present to take out our checkbooks and write FGC a \$100 check. Friends, in 18 years of involvement with unprogrammed Quakers, I have never heard such an appeal made on behalf of a major organization; why, I believe if George Webb had had a hat, he would actually have *passed* it. His challenge got results, too; reportedly over \$1000 in checks and pledges.

FUM staff tell me they too are reconsidering how to get their message across to Friends in member YMs more clearly and more often. I wouldn't be surprised if this means you and I will be getting more mail and other appeals from them; and with all due respect to the trees such efforts will consume, I say it is about time. Quakers do not lack the funds to support our organizations; we have mostly not been asked often and openly enough, and we have been more than happy to let our organizations limp along or wither away. I am thankful for George Webb's bold stroke against this trend; and I hope we see more like it.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

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ANTI-CHRISTIAN PREJUDICE AMONG LIBERAL FRIENDS

Among my generation of convinced liberal Friends, there are a significant number who have gone on to identify strongly with Quakerism's Christian heritage. There are enough such people that their ranks were described in the 1/1984 issue of *Quaker Life* as embodying a surge of renewal among Friends today. Yet the same issue of the magazine also reported that many of these people feel increasingly confined by the atmosphere of the Society, to the point where some are speaking of leaving it unless it changes. I have heard several similar comments from Friends who can be considered part of this particular Christian constituency; some even joke grimly about joining a "Gospel Ministry Relocation Project."

The prospect of their leaving, however, is nothing to laugh about. Among these uncomfortable Christian Quakers are many rising leaders and staff of Yearly Meetings and associations, dedicated Friends the Society can ill afford to lose. Thus, I think it is important to give ear to their concerns. In discussions with several of them as to what it is in the atmosphere among unprogrammed Friends that has brought some of them to consider departure, two factors seem preeminent:

The Origins Of A Possible Exodus

First, there is the lack of theological clarity among us, what one writer in the same issue of *Quaker Life* referred to as "a feeling of being so diffuse that we have lost a clear identity," and another writer described as the espousal of nothing more than a "spume of vague and unsubstantial generalities," which leads to an inability to set or keep standards for belief or behavior, and an urge to "seek unity at any price, however disingenuous the agreement may be." In particular, these writers and others deplore what they see as the loss of a Christian identification as the central basis for this clarity in faith and practice.

Secondly, many have complained of frequent incidents of actual anti-Christian prejudice on the part of various unprogrammed Friends and meetings. One person, an experienced and widely-traveled Friend, tells with dismay of being taken aside by weighty members whose meetings this person was planning to visit and being told flatly *not to speak* to the group of this person's Christian faith, or even of Quakerism in Christian terms. On another occasion this Friend was shown a piece of Friends General Conference literature which stated that Quakerism had Christian roots(which it does), and this person was told that such statements ought to be *expunged* from such publications because Friends were now "beyond all that." This Friend has experienced numerous such incidents, which cumulatively have been very disheartening.

A Widespread Undercurrent of Prejudice

But there is no need, in describing this phenomenon, to depend on the reports of others. I have encountered such sentiments frequently, and recall well one Yearly Meeting where the handful of openly Christian Quakers present met as a separate interest group in an almost underground atmosphere. I have heard Friends who would insist on tolerant acceptance in matters of lifestyle stand and denounce mentions of Christ and the Bible as not just obsolete but offensive. It doesn't surprise me a bit that some Quaker Christians have grown more than a little tired of such treatment.

In considering these two factors, the second seems to me more easily dealt with than the first. Liberal Quakers, if we have any dogma at all, speak ever and anon about the virtues of openness, tolerance and respect for one another's spiritual search, sentiments I can cordially unite with. It ought to be obvious just how inconsistent with these affirmations is such squelching of the views of other equally devoted Friends who happen to be Christian. To be sure, such outbursts may be understandable, especially considering two facts of our recent history: First, that very many convinced Friends come to the Society after unpleasant or oppressive experiences in or at the hands of other Christian groups; and second, that for many years until recently the larger unprogrammed groups have been under the influence of a unitarian-humanist religious outlook, in which the less said about doctrines the better, and enthusiasm about anything but worthy causes was suspect or at least unseemly.

While the latter of these influences carries little weight in my view, the first

demands that Christian Quakers cultivate great sensitivity and tenderness as they seek to bear a faithful witness. But neither of these factors can excuse intolerance of Quaker Christian expression, and the sooner we all learn to practice what we preach in this regard, the better. Consider how one uncomfortable Christian Friend expressed his situation: *"I am feeling a spiritual renewal which I express in Christian terms, and I need to have room made for that among liberal Friends, and to be affirmed and rejoiced with for it."* That does not seem to me too much to ask, or any more than has been asked by many other constituencies among us.

No End Runs On The Contemporary Quaker Tradition

On the other hand, regarding the first issue raised above I find it harder to respond as sympathetically. It is of course true, as uncomfortable Christian Quakers often complain, that unprogrammed Friends generally are a very mixed theological bag, among which the finding of doctrinal consensus or the setting of clear standards is difficult, often to the point of impossibility, as I know from painful experience. And yet, when I hear or make this complaint, I end up asking myself and others, *Just exactly what were we expecting?* American Quakers are part of a culture that is awash in confused, competing and contradictory worldviews; is it any wonder many of us have trouble settling on one of our own, and is it so shocking that we expect the Quaker community to provide, at the least, a safe harbor for us while we attempt to work through this confusion? I read much about other churches, and I doubt that we are so much worse off than they. We are only less able to conceal or ignore this situation.

My point is that, troublesome as it often is, the liberal Quaker fuzziness of religious identity is neither unique nor something we have concocted simply to irritate those who have clear beliefs; rather, it is part of our *condition*, the result of our living in the culture we do, at the time we do. We can't escape it; we can only attempt to work our way through it. One might as well criticize Third World people for being poor and oppressed, or cancer patients for being sick.

But then, what can be done about this condition? Let us suppose one is a Christian, who believes this worldview offers a solution. In that case, one might well consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 9:10-13, especially the declaration that *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."* (See also First Corinthians 13.) Which is to say, it is my conviction that the major task of religious leadership among unprogrammed Friends in our time is to assist us in coming to grips with our condition, help us bring it into the Light, and develop a more faithful witness into the future. To continue the analogies, such leadership would seek to assist Third World people in overcoming poverty and oppression, and help cancer victims look for a cure.

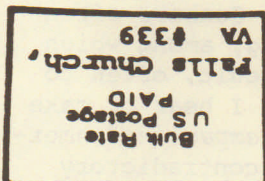
Learning The Leaven of Love

Furthermore, our condition is not just something to apologize about. Is it really all bad to be undefined, to be less than certain of our identity? If there is vagueness among liberal Friends, there is also much flexibility and openness; furthermore, it can take considerable courage to stand up for one's uncertainty and see it through, rather than settling for the false refuge of some borrowed doctrine. At the least, it can create opportunities for continuing revelation. It is a mistake to regard this condition as nothing more than backsliding or heresy. It is not that simple.

Let me suggest, then, that the role of convinced Christians among unprogrammed Friends is, as Jesus charged them, to pitch in and leaven the lump that is us; and for those of honestly uncertain theology, but genuine Quaker commitment, to wear their vagueness as long--but as tolerantly--as they can. And could both also strive to learn to love one another? This last ought to offer a common ground: it is a commandment understandable even by the very confused, while for Christians it is how, in John 13:35, Jesus said the world would know they were *truly* his disciples. What would the Society of Friends look like in such a renewed condition? I don't know, but I'd sure like to find out.

INSIDE: A DARK STRAIN IN LIBERAL QUAKERISM:
ANTI-CHRISTIAN PREJUDICE

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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

In this month 1971, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting adopted and released to the press a minute directed at then-president Richard Nixon, rebuking him for describing himself as "a devout Quaker pacifist" in a *New York Times* interview earlier that year. "This is not our understanding of the Quaker Peace Testimony," the Philadelphia Friends declared, adding the request that Nixon make no "further distortion" of Friends' historic and deeply felt conviction."

It was in this month in 1656 that James Nayler rode into Bristol, England. Nayler was one of the leading members of the First Publishers of Truth; some say his prestige rivaled that of George Fox. In Bristol he was met by several overenthusiastic women who greeted him with hosannas, talking as if he were the Second Coming. This enthusiasm went to his head, with tragic results for him and the fledgling Quaker movement: Nayler was tried for blasphemy, imprisoned and tortured; and the incident turned the full fury of government persecution onto all who went by the name of Friends.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

The Friendly Old West

A drunken cowboy charged into a frontier saloon one day, waving a Colt .45 and yelling, "All right you mangy varmints, clear out and give a man some elbow room!" All the customers fled except for one plainly-dressed man wearing a broadbrimmed hat. The cowboy sauntered over to his table and said, "Maybe you didn't hear me, partner. I said for all the mangy varmints to clear out."

The other looked up from his glass of milk and replied, "I heard thee, friend. And I must say, there certainly were a lot of them, weren't there?"

The Devil Made Me Say It

Not far away a pioneer Quaker farmer was looking for his prize steer, whose appointment with the butcher had come. What did he say when he heard the animal moo? What else:

"Where's thee, beef?"