

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Forty-Four

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Eleventh Month, 1984

Dear Friend,

With this issue I break my own ironclad rule that this newsletter should not exceed four pages. But the story inside would not fit in that space, and I saw no way of avoiding telling it. It is not a very happy or pleasant report, but one certain to be unreported elsewhere.

Before you turn to it, let me brush quickly over several news items:

* I have received almost 400 copies of my Quaker poll survey, with many now from programmed Friends. The response is way beyond my expectations, and we shall tally them as best we can, aiming for a report in next month's issue.

* I have heard from both the Dean and a brace of students at Swarthmore College regarding the drinking incident described last month. The Dean said campus policies governing alcohol use on campus were under review, and will likely be tightened; the students, both young Friends, assure us that such incidents are not the rule there. That is good news.

* A subscriber in Chicago, Sabron Newton, has done considerable research on the background of Benjamin Rush, mentioned in the last issue as the Quaker who signed the Declaration of Independence and helped write the first proposal for a Peace Academy. It appears that while he was of Quaker stock, there is no solid evidence that he was himself a Friend; his wife was almost certainly a Presbyterian. I guess I stand corrected on that point.

* Finally, it is time to begin thinking about, and nominating candidates for Quaker of the Year, our annual salute to Friends who ought to be on the cover of *TIME* Magazine in its New Year issue but probably won't be. Please let me know your suggestions.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

PS. It is also time to think about holiday gift subscriptions. A form is enclosed for this purpose.

TWO CASUALTIES OF THE FRIENDS MINISTERS CONFERENCE

This is a story of how sectarian infighting affected two of our more prominent Friends, one temporarily and one probably for good.

The story began quietly last summer, with the following brief and deceptively understated affirmation:

"We are not to judge people; that is God's business. And so we sometimes find ourselves coming into the Kingdom (of God) in the company of people whose names would not have occurred to us--people not high on the hierarchical ladders of our society, people oppressed because of their color, or their sex, or their lack of education, or their poverty, people whose life styles and sexual preferences and ways of speaking and thinking are different from our own."

The speaker was Elizabeth Watson; the place an auditorium at Chapman College in Orange, California; the occasion an evening session of Friends United Meeting's 1984 Triennial, last Seventh Month 13. (This passage is taken directly from a tape of the talk.)

Speaking The Word That Some Did Not Want To Hear

Elizabeth Watson, an unprogrammed but seminary-trained Friend from New England YM, has become a widely-respected and much sought-after speaker among Friends groups in recent years, especially for Bible studies. She has lectured and conducted Bible study for such groups as the United Society of Friends Women, North Carolina, Indiana and Western YMs, George Fox College, the Earlham School of Religion and numerous unprogrammed gatherings. Her studies of women in the Bible were published by Friends United Press in the volume *Daughters of Zion*. With this record it was no surprise that she was invited to address FUM's Triennial.

In her talk, Elizabeth Watson's overall theme was "Comforting God's People." It was a wide-ranging but very personal speech, based on a passage from Isaiah 40:1. The passage quoted above was tucked in toward the end. She had been unsure, she said later, about whether to include the phrase "sexual preferences" in it until earlier that same morning. Then, in a Bible study session on Jeremiah, the FUM delegates were told that a prophet sometimes is called on to say the word that people do not want to hear. This comment gave her clarity, and she included the phrase, without giving it any special emphasis.

Standing Tall Against "Violations of Scripture"

In Jeremiah's case, the prophet got to watch the king take a scroll containing the words he did not want to hear and burn it, piece by piece. The response to Elizabeth Watson's comment, though delayed until three months after the Triennial ended, was not much less incendiary: It surfaced in California YM, which had hosted the Triennial, at the autumn meeting of the Pastor's Short Course Committee. In the committee's judgment, as summarized by CYM Superintendent Chuck Mylander, "it was a violation of Scripture and the Light of Christ to speak in favor of homosexuality." And that is what they felt Elizabeth Watson had done by remarking that we might find people of other sexual preferences than our own in the Kingdom of God. This conclusion reflects their interpretation of such texts as First Corinthians 6:9. Furthermore, the committee felt it must take immediate action on its belief.

Action seemed necessary because the Committee was considering a call to the Third Friends Ministers Conference, planned for Fifth Month, 1985 in Chicago. This Conference, a joint effort of FUM and the Evangelical Alliance, was the first one planned to include unprogrammed Friends within its definition of "Ministers," and to encourage them to come. What the California committee felt obliged to act on was the Conference schedule of speakers: There, invited to conduct morning Bible study sessions was an unprogrammed, but seminary-trained Friend from New England YM named--Elizabeth Watson.

Such violations of Scripture as those attributed to her were not to be tolerated. (Besides the "sexual preferences" remark, there were also reports of complaints about her having described her text as coming from "Second Isaiah," reflecting the view that this book includes the work of two or three different prophets, a view strongly rejected by biblical literalists.) In any event, the California YM Pastor's Short Course Committee, as Chuck Mylander put it, "requested a change of speakers" at the Friends Ministers Conference.

But they did more than simply request a change. They demanded one. Further, they sped their message to like-minded pastors and superintendents in Rocky Mountain, Iowa and Indiana YMs, and soon had formal or informal agreement to mount a widespread boycott of the Conference unless Elizabeth Watson was dropped from the program.

This demand crisscrossed the country by telephone, but it ended up up in the laps of the two co-chairs of the Conference planning committee, Stan Perisho, pastor of North Valley Friends Church in Newberg, Oregon, and Bob Williams, Meeting Ministries Secretary of Friends United Meeting in Richmond, Indiana.

Where the Buck Stopped, and the Threats Started

Of the two, Bob Williams seemed to feel the mounting pressure most intensely. For one thing, he comes out of a fundamentalist Quaker background in Kansas, and while his work in FUM over the past four years had broadened his outlook considerably, he is still a staunchly biblical, midwestern Christian. More practically, however, he was the one who carried the most day-to-day responsibility for the endless details that go into the preparations for such a gathering. This in addition to a bulging portfolio of FUM responsibilities.

The pressure he felt was further increased by the fact that the first wave of the dump-Watson campaign came just before the fall sessions of FUM's Boards and Commissions. And not least, Bob Williams just liked Elizabeth Watson and her approach, and very much wanted to keep her on the program.

The storm broke in the sessions of the FUM Spiritual Life Board, meeting in the third week of Tenth Month: Elizabeth Watson was charged with having said in her talk that "homosexuality is a viable lifestyle." This charge came from several Friends who had not heard her FUM address. They called for her replacement; failing that, they insisted that another, more acceptable speaker be scheduled at the same hour as an option for dissidents. She was just as vigorously defended by others; Bob Williams spoke strongly in defense of both her and the invitation from the Conference to her. He even said he would rather resign than ask her to withdraw. One participant described the debate with great understatement as "strenuous."

FUM Faces The Issue; But, So What?

At length, FUM's incoming Presiding Clerk, Richard Whitehead of Iowa, suggested that the dissidents, who were reacting to secondhand reports of what Elizabeth Watson supposedly had said, listen to the tape of her FUM talk before speaking further. Several did; they returned to admit that the statement attributed to her was not on it, and withdrew their objections. The Meeting Ministries Commission, acting on the Spiritual Life Board's recommendation, sent a minute of support to the General Board. The minute (84-GB-#71), as approved by the General Board, read as follows:

"We are aware that there are those in the Yearly Meetings who may not attend the Ministers Conference because of Elizabeth Watson being on the program, and we are sensitive to that report. We do wish to express our confidence in the (Conference) Program Committee and the work they are doing. We encourage those opposed to Elizabeth Watson being on the program to unite in the spirit of the Conference and to participate in it. This minute is being sent to the Friends Ministers Conference Program Committee."

Bob Williams felt particularly supported, even vindicated by this minute. The General Board, rather than yielding to the calls for Elizabeth Watson's replacement, had

after ~~extended~~ consideration made a plea for tolerance on the part of those who differed with her. This action was also consistent with its standing policy on Openness adopted in 1983, which asserted FUM's commitment to permitting even the most difficult issues of Friends' life together to be examined openly in free and reverent seeking. The Ministers Conference minute seemed to participate a fair and careful outcome.

But the sense of having resolved the matter did not last long. Within 48 hours the calls were being made again, mostly from FUM-affiliated YMs and pastors, again demanding Elizabeth's Watson's ouster and renewing threats of a boycott if this was not done soon. As far as the boycotters were concerned, the FUM General Board's minutes on Openness in general and for tolerance of Elizabeth Watson's invitation in particular might as well never have been written.

Steve Main, Superintendent of Iowa YM, was a vigorous exponent of the demand for a replacement. He said Elizabeth Watson in her FUM address had "taken a liberty she shouldn't have," violating what he believes was "a gentleman's agreement" to have no mention made at FUM's general sessions, even thus allusively, to the subject of homosexuality, and particularly to any expression of a view that a homosexual might somehow gain entry into the kingdom.

Taking Undue Liberties With Gentleman's Agreements

Steve Main said he had spoken to her afterward and verified that she had indeed *intended* to make the reference. This deliberateness reinforced his conviction of her unsuitability as a speaker at the Ministers Conference. The only option he had considered was to ask the Iowa FUM representative to request that if Elizabeth Watson were to be retained as a speaker, it be only on the basis of a firm pledge by her to make no statement whatever on the subject in her presentations.

This suggestion was not accepted, and Steve Main was further confirmed in his opposition. He also stated, erroneously, that the General Board's minute had only offered general support to the Conference planning committee's work, not to its invitation to Elizabeth Watson. In any case, he was certain that if the pastors of Iowa YM thought there was a chance homosexuality might even be mentioned with empathy by a conference speaker, "it would destroy the conference," because they would boycott it en masse, as would those from California and elsewhere.

Such was the message driven home to Stan Perisho of EFA, and to Bob Williams at the FUM offices, in the week after the General Board meeting. In a series of long-distance calls, they and other planning committee members took stock of the situation:

Weighing The Conference in the Balance

The Conference, they knew, has no financial cushion; it must pay its way out of attenders' fees. But it soon looked as if, in the face of the threatened boycott, the conference would not have enough attenders to meet its expenses. "The committee felt we could not jeopardize the conference," Stan Perisho said later. By Eleventh Month, First, precisely a week after the General Board's action, the committee reluctantly concluded that Elizabeth Watson should be called and encouraged to step aside. This task fell to Bob Williams.

Bob said this week of frantic, failing efforts to stem the boycott threatss placed him under severe emotional and physical strain; he says his blood pressure was greatly elevated and he had even suffered chest pains. His coworkers confirm that he was showing visible signs of stress. Now he was faced with doing something he had said he would rather resign than do. Nevertheless, late that afternoon, he picked up the phone and made the call.

Elizabeth Watson now says she was planning to devote her talks at the Conference to further studies of women in the Bible. She hoped by so doing to offer a special affirmation to the small number of women pastors in FUM and EFA. She had met many of them, and found them a committed and talented group, but one not well-represented in the planning and programming of previous ministers conferences. Indeed, she says, a number of these women had

told her that they felt very affirmed by the invitation to her to speak.

Elizabeth Watson had not, she says, given any thought to speaking about homosexuality in her talks.

When Bob Williams called, he told her of the burgeoning boycott threats and the danger it posed to the conference. She promptly suggested that perhaps the committee should find someone to replace her rather than jeopardize the gathering. Bob Williams said he told her she was standing a lot taller than her critics. (The committee has since selected Alan Kolp, professor and former dean of ESR, to be her replacement.)

This should be the end of the story, but it isn't. Not long after making this call, Bob Williams left the FUM offices, telling coworkers he was going out to eat and clear his head before working some more. He says he was as confused and depressed as he had been in a long time. Whatever his private thoughts and feelings were, though, his next actions were soon to become a matter of public record:

Going Public in a Very Private Way

He stopped his car behind a downtown Richmond drugstore. Two men got in and the trio drove around, talking. When the car stopped, the two passengers revealed themselves to be undercover policemen, one of whom was carrying a concealed tape recorder. Bob Williams was then arrested for soliciting male prostitution, handcuffed and taken to jail. He was later bailed out, and a trial date set for next month. The following day, a report of his arrest appeared in the Richmond *Palladium-Item*.

As news spread of his arrest and the charge, the FUM Executive and Personnel Committees were notified and began to consider what to do. They reportedly examined the police evidence, including the tape-recorded conversation. They were also told, by persons they considered reliable, that Bob Williams had been involved in other homosexual incidents.

Steve Main of Iowa YM is chair of the Personnel Committee. He said the committee soon had good reason to believe the police charges and other reports were true, and by Thursday, Eleventh Month, Eighth, members knew what they had to do. "To resign in that situation was simply the appropriate thing to do," Steve Main said. "Such a person is a liability to the organization; his reputation is a liability." That afternoon Presiding Clerk Richard Whitehead called Bob Williams and offered him a choice: resign now, or be suspended pending the outcome of both the legal process and a further background investigation by FUM. Bob Williams said he would resign. The next morning he arrived at the FUM offices at 5:30 AM, cleaned out his desk and was gone before 8:00; he has not returned.

Burning Bridges, Or Opening Doors?

It seems evident that Bob Williams's actions were clearly related to the events of the previous two weeks. They were not exactly a protest against them, since involvement in homosexual activity permanently discredits a person in the eyes of such as those who had led the anti-Elizabeth Watson drive, and he knew this. Rather, it seems to me that, whether fully aware of it or not, when he left the FUM offices that night he was preparing to commit a kind of career suicide. That, after all, is another certain outcome of such an incident.

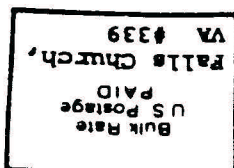
But why would he do that? He had been under similar pressure, not just in the Elizabeth Watson case but repeatedly during his tenure. In that light, his action might be seen as not simply a self-destructive impulse, but perhaps also as an effective and abrupt way of breaking loose from an environment no longer tolerable. A new start is always a possibility for a person; but after that night, for Bob Williams it became a necessity.

Certainly he does not seem to have given in to despair, self-loathing or denial as a result of it. Since his resignation he has declared himself committed to preserving his marriage and making sense out of his life, and has been involved in intensive counseling and worship to these ends. How this process will turn out, of course, no one can predict. Yet when we talked recently, he sounded more like a man determined than a man defeated.

No, the remaining uncertainties in this story concern Bob Williams less than they do those who have now succeeded in banishing Elizabeth Watson from the Friends Ministers Conference. I wonder if this campaign has truly enhanced their ability to witness to authentic Christianity? Has it really improved their ability to win souls to Christ? And are they sure that Bob Williams is the only one here with cause for repentance and in need of forgiveness? I wonder.

INSIDE: THE FIGHT OVER ELIZABETH WATSON
AND THE FRIENDS MINISTERS CONFERENCE

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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Last month we noted the granting of honorary U.S. citizenship posthumously to William and Hannah Penn by Congress. Another distinguished Friend of the colonial period who was also active and successful in government though but little-known today was John Archdale, who was installed as governor of the Carolina colonies on 11/28/1694. In many ways, Archdale compares favorably to Penn as a practical statesman. While Penn was a great visionary and political theorist, he had a devil of a time trying to actually govern his dominion, and in the end wound up in bankruptcy from mismanagement and incompetence. Archdale by contrast was appointed to clean up a mess of strife and dissension in the colony, and clean it up he did: he managed to balance the various factions, promote religious toleration, keep peace with both the Indians and the Catholic Spaniards who were then controlling Florida, and maintain the goodwill of just about everyone. He is generally agreed to have been the best of the Carolina colonial governors. After his return to England, in 1698 he was even elected to Parliament, the first Friend to be elected; but as he declined to take the necessary oaths, he was refused his seat.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

A Friendly Meal

"I'm expecting several traveling ministers to dine with me tomorrow," a British gentleman once said to his butler.

"Very good, sir, said the butler. "Are they Episcopal or Quaker ministers, sir?"

"Why, what difference does that make?" asked the astonished gentleman.

"Everything, sir," was the reply. "If they are Episcopalians, they'll drink; but if they are Quakers, they'll eat!"

To Catch a Thief

A Quaker minister was asked to substitute for a Congregational preacher at a remote country church. The Quaker did his best, but was surprised to see the old deacon who had been taking up the collection quietly take a five dollar bill out before presenting the collection plate at the railing. Afterwards he called the man in and told him with some warmth that his crime had been discovered. After looking puzzled for a moment, the light dawned on the deacon and he said, "Why, sir, you don't mean that old fiver of mine? I've led off with that every week for 20 years."
