

# A Friendly Letter

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Dear Friend,

I need your advice: Would six pages per issue of this letter be too much? I ask that because either the pace of important events among American Friends is picking up, or I am noticing more than formerly, because there are several items which, if reported on here, would again add two extra pages to this issue. I have avoided that this time, not only for reasons of time and expense, but also because one of my editorial objectives has been to keep this letter brief and compact. But what does thee think? Would such an expansion be tolerable? If that size became habitual, the subscription price would have to go up, as the cost increment is significant. Please let me know your thoughts.

One news item that can't be passed by concerns the Richmond Declaration of Faith, a document whose centennial will be observed next summer at the Triennial sessions of Friends United Meeting, for which the Declaration is the Authorized Declaration of Faith. To these observances is now likely to be added a proposal that FUM reaffirm the Declaration, coming from California YM, which was just renamed Friends Church: Southwest Yearly Meeting. It asks FUM to "reaffirm the basic Christianity of the Richmond Declaration," based on "our experience of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior," who is "the focal point of our faith as Friends...."

This proposal will be controversial, as the Declaration has been a center of controversy among Friends ever since 1887. California's minute acknowledges that "not all Friends will interpret the Declaration in precisely the same way," and affirms that it "is not a creed." Yet already there is a counter-minute from Western YM in Indiana to FUM which laments that some "would have us center much of our time and attention [at the Triennial] on statements of the past." Instead, Western asserts that "Today, as in the past, openness to the living Christ can unite us in faith and action more than creedal statements."

There is likely to be discussion of this in other FUM YMs as well. Yet I for one am grateful to California for raising it, because it will give FUM a chance to talk seriously about the basic issues of its identity as a Quaker body; and FUM is in particular need of such threshing. We will follow this issue as it develops.

Yours in the Light,

*Chuck Fager*  
Chuck Fager

PS. One other quick item: A new publication, the *Midwest Pacifist Commentator*, may be of interest to many Friends. Its Issue Number Five includes a long obituary for Friend Larry Scott, a founder of SANE and the Committee for Nonviolent Action and a premier Quaker peace activist of our time, who was killed in Eighth Month in an auto accident. The *Commentator's* Editor-Publisher is Brad Lytle, of Chicago's 57th St. Meeting and a distinguished peace activist himself. The *Commentator's* address is 5729 S. Dorchester, Chicago IL 60637; subscriptions are by donation.

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## THE AFSC: QUAKERS VS. NON-QUAKERS?

On Tenth Month 31, Halloween, the Corporation of the American Friends Service Committee will hold its annual meeting in Philadelphia. This may be a crucial meeting in AFSC history--or it may not, depending on your point of view. In any case, it won't be dull.

The big issue the Corporation faces is one carried over from last year's session, which became downright contentious: Should non-Friends be allowed to become full members of the AFSC National Board? Such non-Quaker membership would be limited to those persons serving as clerks of the executive committees of AFSC Regional offices, of which there are now nine. Regional clerks normally sit on the Board ex-officio, but the non-Friend clerks take part as "representatives to the Board" rather than full members of the Board. Adoption of this proposal would require a change in the AFSC's by-laws, which only the Corporation can make.

Whether rightly or not, this proposal became something like a fishhook, which drew up into the light of day the long-smoldering and heartfelt uneasiness of a goodly number of Corporation members about what they saw as a dangerous drift by the AFSC away from its Quaker roots; and it was strongly argued that putting non-Friends formally on the Board would mark a quantum jump in the process, one they did not like. In the end, the Corporation agreed only to continue for one year the non-Quaker clerks' current status as representatives to the Board rather than members of it, and to consider the proposal further this year.

### *The Case For Change*

Since then, the AFSC Board has weighed in fully in support of the proposed change, and Board Chair Steve Cary has urged Corporation members to support it at the upcoming meeting. At this point, however, it looks as though the discussion next month could be much like last year's, as I have seen few indications of changed opinions on the matter.

The case for making the change can be summarized in three points: First, the AFSC has been for some years seeking to make its staff and committees more representative of the diversity of American society. Gaining such diversity has meant including many non-Friends, since American Quakers are mainly white and middle class. But for such diversity to be genuine, the newcomers must share access to the levers of authority and policymaking; otherwise they are "second-class citizens." Second, the non-Quaker clerks of regional executive committees, like their Quaker counterparts, have all shown years of devotion to the AFSC and its ways; they have all been assets to the body and should be part of its Board structure on the same basis as anyone else. And third, in practice these non-Quaker clerks have long taken part in Board deliberations as if they were full members; hence the by-laws change really amounts to no more than a recognition of what has long been the status quo.

### *The Case Against Change*

The arguments against the change are not so easy to summarize. But they too all lead back to the by-laws, not to the section on Board membership (Article IV, Section 1), but rather to Article 1, Section 3, which lays out the AFSC's Purpose and Object: This section states that AFSC is to work "on behalf of the participating yearly Meetings and other bodies of the Religious Society of Friends in America; and in addition...to promote the general objects and purposes of the participating yearly Meetings and other bodies of[Friends]...."

There, when all is said and done, is the rub. Whether this purpose statement ever described how the AFSC actually worked, it is incontestable that today it does not now work in any meaningful sense "on behalf of" any other Quaker body: The organization pursues its own agenda and programs, which are generated internally by its staff and committees. In 1985, 85 percent of this staff was non-Quaker in composition; furthermore, on the Corporation and Board, delegates nominated by yearly meetings have long been outnumbered by those appointed "at large" by AFSC's own nominating committee. Thus the range of Quaker viewpoints represented in AFSC's councils tends to be a rather limited one. In addition, the virtual disappearance of certain programs, especially the now legendary Quaker youth programs centered around workcamps, is seen as having essentially eliminated the important services which AFSC once provided to a wider range of Friends at the yearly meeting level.



Another important consideration in the critics' minds is based on the fact that in its early years, the AFSC played an important ecumenical role among American Friends, helping draw together the Hicksite and Orthodox wings after a century of painful division. This function too has long since gone by the boards; the AFSC is now, and has been for some years, one of the sources of deepest division and contention on the American Quaker scene.

Finally, some critics are very dubious about the authenticity of the AFSC's claims to have achieved "diversity." Looking at its literature, this "diversity" is one almost exclusively of the political left, which viewed from outside is not much genuine diversity at all. Further, many, perhaps most of the world's Quakers are now non-white and non-middle class; many cultures could have been tapped for AFSC staff positions without leaving the Society's ranks. To be sure, these non-white and non-middle class Quakers are also diverse politically and religiously, tending toward the evangelical end of the spectrum; making sense of the AFSC's directions with them on board would be a challenge. But would this be so bad? As it is, Steve Cary wrote to the Corporation last Sixth Month that coping with the cultural diversity the group has achieved is already "far more difficult than all of us who sought to reach out to others have ever imagined"; but this is no surprise to anyone who has observed the political left in its endless intramural struggles.

Again, no matter how closely AFSC ever embodied it, its own purpose statement serves to bolster the critics' concern that the group has changed from what it was into something else, something they find increasingly harder to recognize as distinctively Quaker. This process would, they feel, be accelerated by the formal addition of non-Quakers to the Board.

### *Perspective: Hands Full of Ambivalence*

Having laid out these opposing positions, this is the point at which to put in my editorial two cents worth. Certainly the issue of the AFSC's Quaker character is one that has long perplexed me. But weighing these various perspectives, I find myself in the position of the Friend who was discovered arguing against a position he had earlier espoused; when this was pointed out, he confessed that "I guess I am not always of my own opinion."

And so it is here. My own response to this issue is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it seems time to let go of old images of what the AFSC might have been, and the things it used to do, and to deal with it as it is. After all, no group escapes change, and AFSC's defenders argue with some justice that its evolution has been based on its own experience, which is as valid as that of the critics. Our question to it today should be, how can what AFSC is and does **now** be brought into the light? Letting go of old images would also begin to free up the energy now devoted to berating the Service Committee for not doing for Friends what we would like it to do, for redirection into new efforts to do those things for ourselves. The emergence in the last few years of new Quaker workcamp and youth service programs in several parts of the country and under the auspices of FUM is a fine example of this process. In this light, the proposed by-laws change does not seem important, since it simply ratifies what has been actual practice for a decade. If any other change were called for, it would perhaps be the abolition of the Corporation itself as obsolete, and no longer appropriate to the AFSC as an independent, self-directed entity within the Quaker orbit.

But no sooner is the last paragraph on paper than a voice of protest wells up from within. No, it cries, this is too easy! The past is **not** irrelevant to the present, and the AFSC's departure from its own original purposes should **not** be allowed to pass without resistance. These models, however imperfectly realized, produced a record of service that won a Nobel Peace Prize and won Friends worldwide respect; it is folly to simply discard them. And it is not wrong to expect the largest Quaker service body to be substantially made up of Quakers, and to be in broad, ongoing engagement with the Society in all its bewildering and unwieldy diversity; or that it be a force for helping reconcile conflicts among Friends rather than exacerbating them; or for it to be somehow meaningfully accountable to the Society at large, even if it is hard to say exactly how. This by-laws change marks another step into a largely secular, liberal-left ghetto and away from the mainstream Quaker community which is AFSC's spiritual seedbed. The whole trend it epitomizes is regrettable, and the dissidents can't be blamed for wanting to draw the line there, at least until these issues are better sorted out than they are.

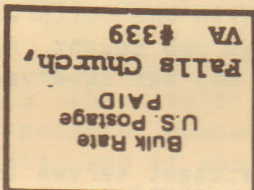
So there I am, with feet planted firmly if uncharacteristically on both sides of this issue. I hope the Corporation can find more clarity on this question than is offered here.



POSTMASTER: Time-dated newsletter. Do not delay.

INSIDE: THE AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE  
AND AMERICAN FRIENDS--  
AT A CROSSROADS?

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

It was in this month, 1772, that John Woolman died, after contracting smallpox. He was in England, where he had been travelling in the ministry among British Friends. Woolman had arrived in London three months earlier, just in time for Yearly Meeting; and although he was the quietest of Quakerists, he caused a stir at the Meeting of Ministers and Elders when he presented his travelling minute for approval. According to the traditional account of the session, these weighty Friends took one look at him and wanted nothing further to do with the man: He was wearing very plain, undyed clothes, from a white hat, to a jacket with woolen buttons and no lapels, to shoes of undyed leather. This apparel was part of his personal testimony of simplicity, and avoidance of what he saw as the damage done by the dyeing industry. His minute was read, but then John Fothergill, a senior Elder, rose to say coolly that his concern to travel was "accepted," but that he might now return home without further ado.

Woolman rose and gently demurred. Without approval from the Elders he did not feel free to travel, but he likewise did not yet feel released from his concern. In that case, he would not impose upon Friends' hospitality, but would seek to work at his tailor's trade until some further leading became clear. He sat down again, and after more silence, the quality of his spirit began to be apparent to the Elders, who then reversed themselves and endorsed his minute. When he began his travels, he was grieved by what he saw of the conditions of both the horses used for coaches, and the ostlers who handled them; so he walked from place to place, impressing the Friends he visited with the testimony of his life. His life ended in York where he is buried at Bishophill; but his testimony continues.

### QUAKER CHUCKLE

A young woman Friend of the old school fell in love with a non-Friend and impulsively decided to elope with him. They went to the home of a parson, and asked to be married in his living room. The parson agreed, got out his prayer book, and began to read the traditional vows, which the young woman had never heard before: "Do you," he asked the groom, "take this woman for better or for worse, through sickness and health, in good times or bad, whether she be..."

"Oh," interrupted the bride in tears, "thee mustn't say anything more! If thee's not careful, thee will talk him right out of it."