

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Seventy-Five

ISSN #0739-5418

Sixth Month, 1987

Dear Friend,

As mentioned last month, the review and analysis of *A Friendly Letter's* first six years of publication by Richard Cimino, editor of *Religion Watch*, is now completed and is enclosed in this issue. It is being published without editorial changes, except for a few subheadings I inserted for graphic purposes. It is a supplement to the main report, on the Friends United Meeting Triennial sessions held at Guilford College in North Carolina on 6/12-19.

Speaking of the Guilford session, it is my sense that Quaker history was made there, and you will find some of the reasons for that judgment, and a sketch of some of the key events, on the next two pages. As the largest and broadest Quaker association, FUM's ups and downs have been a frequent focus of our reports, as in issues #23, #30, #35 and #44. Issues #69 and #72 went into the background and issues facing the Triennial in considerable detail. (Back copies are available for interested new readers, at \$1.50 each, or \$1.00 apiece for three or more.)

Another history-making Quaker conference may be underway by the time many of you receive this issue: The Gathering of Friends General Conference, set for Oberlin College in Ohio 7/4-11, bids fair to attract a record attendance, well in excess of 1700. By the beginning of Sixth Month, FGC staff were already scrambling to cope with such hazards of success as full-to-bursting children's groups and the likelihood of overtaxed campus facilities. They have displayed considerable skill in handling such pleasant exigencies at last year's gathering in Minnesota, where the turnout far outran expectations. But beyond the everyday matters of finding enough beds and ending up financially in the red for a change, these two large turnouts confirm the impression of unprogrammed American Quakerism, with all its bewildering variety, as a growing, thriving concern. Drawing out the implications of this unruly growth will form a major item on our agenda as the months unfold.

A more immediate item on our agenda is an apology, due to the Quaker U.S.-U.S.S.R. Committee. Last month we said here that one of their lovely postcards, which help raise funds for their project of a book of top-quality Russian and American writing to be jointly selected and published, was being inserted in each subscriber's copy that issue. Unfortunately, somewhere between our writing and publishing the intention went awry, and the cards never got inserted. So we will try again: Look for a card in this issue; and if it is not there, you can get one, plus more information about an impressive Quaker project, by writing to: The Quaker U.S.-U.S.S.R. Committee, 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia PA 19102.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

FRIENDS UNITED MEETING: A NEW BEGINNING AT GUILFORD

Did Friends United Meeting (FUM) make a new beginning at its Guilford Triennial this month? I think so, but to explain why I need first to talk about dates. On the surface, the Triennial was built around the Centennial of the Richmond Conference of 1887, and the Declaration of Faith it produced. But as the sessions unfolded, another anniversary haunted the proceedings, that of the Hicksite-Orthodox Separation in 1827. That's because while the 1887 conference and Declaration were meant to promote Quaker unity, in 1827, by contrast, differences were the focus of attention; and they were the focus for FUM at Guilford as well.

Faced with important internal differences, there are, it seems to me, three main possible responses: 1. Ignore or paper them over; 2. Separate, so the parties can go their different ways; or 3. Choose to stay together, living with the differences honestly and working to make the diversity productive. In 1827, Philadelphia Friends found themselves confronting differences that ultimately could be neither ignored or evaded; and, fatefully, they opted to deal with them by division and mutual anathemas. The resulting damage has still not been entirely repaired. FUM retraced several of the same steps this month: it, too, faced deep doctrinal divisions, brought to a head by a proposal to reaffirm the long-controversial Richmond Declaration of Faith, differences which after decades of being ignored and fudged, suddenly became impossible to avoid any longer. And, as before, these steps brought FUM to the brink, and left the Triennial staring into the abyss of division.

Stepping Aside From False Pretenses

But unlike Friends in 1827, FUM Friends in 1987 chose to draw back from the prospect of renewed separation, and sought, successfully I believe, another way. The significance of that new way is suggested by a glance at some of the Triennial's high points.

One moment of truth came late Wednesday night, 6/17 when the Nominating Committee presented a slate of officers for the next three years. One nominee was Elizabeth Cazden of New England Yearly Meeting, for Reading Clerk. When her name was mentioned, Friend Cazden walked up to the stage where Presiding Clerk Richard Whitehead stood, took a microphone and said quietly, "I am one of those Quakers you've been hearing rumors about." That is, she explained, she was a Friend who was not able to regard Jesus Christ as her personal lord and savior, and she wanted that fact to be clear before her nomination was acted on, so she would not have to serve under any false pretences. She added that she was quite willing to step aside if there were objection to someone of her convictions being an FUM officer.

This announcement was met by a stunned silence. Then the clerk asked for comments or questions about the nominations. More silence. "Are you ready to approve these nominations?" he asked. There was a chorus of approval. "And is there disapproval?" Another silence. "The nominations are approved," he said.

Blunting the Issues—A Forlorn Hope

Cazden's statement personalized the issues that had been debated with increasing intensity for the previous two hours: Whether or not FUM should reaffirm the Richmond Declaration of Faith, and what such an action would mean. On one side, sponsors of the reaffirmation proposal argued that the Declaration was FUM's equivalent of marriage vows, the basis of its union, and a statement of great personal importance to many of them; it and the Christianity it articulated were the essential elements of FUM's existence. They were shocked and dismayed to find that some FUM Friends did not agree with it, and indeed that some did not even call themselves Christian. On the other side were Friends, like Cazden, who argued that an explicit Christian profession was not a prerequisite to being a Friend in many FUM YMs, that it was time for the body to come to terms with that, and further that the Richmond Declaration was obsolete and too doctrinally sectarian to serve as FUM's basis of unity. It was almost midnight when the nominating committee's report was approved, and the session recessed, with the issue of the Richmond Declaration's fate left hanging.

The confrontation over the Declaration followed an effort, traditional in FUM, to blunt the differences and head off a clash: FUM's General Board, after considerable labor, had agreed last spring on a Minute of Thanksgiving and Calling, which cautiously expressed the

A REVIEW OF A FRIENDLY LETTER

By Richard Cimino
Editor & Publisher, *Religion Watch*

Chuck Fager's *A Friendly Letter* is among the small number of religious publications that operate independently of a church body while providing commentary and coverage of denominational issues. This independent stance often makes such publications less hesitant to cover controversial issues--and less popular with church officials. That is not to say that other Quaker publications don't handle controversy. Denominational Quaker publications as the *Evangelical Friend*--and, to a lesser extent, *Quaker Life*--have dealt with controversial issues, such as abortion, although they often mirror official positions. The independent *Friends Journal* goes one step further; it features articles on controversial issues--AIDS, abortion, South African sanctions, etc.--often from diverse perspectives.

But all of these publications pay more attention to controversy outside of Quakerism than within. And when they do cover troubling Quaker issues they tend to use general language and avoid investigating actual conflicts among Quaker institutions and their leaders. *A Friendly Letter* stands out because it focuses on the controversies and tensions within Quakerism itself, and it does not hesitate to be specific in reporting them. And for its six years the newsletter has trafficked in controversy: frequent reports on the divisions among Kenya's Friends; candid evaluations of *Quaker Life* magazine; problems with Quaker employers and Quaker fundraising, divisions within meetings on homosexuality, to name a few issues. Some readers have criticized the newsletter's "muckracking" reporting as being incompatible with the Quaker virtues of gentleness and compassion. But, on the whole, Fager appears to eschew sensationalism while attempting to report the truth plainly--another Quaker virtue.

Exposing Conflict To Promote resolution

The reporting in *A Friendly Letter* is different from the journalism found on the religion page of newspapers mainly because the editor shows a concern that Quaker conflicts be resolved, not only exposed. So, for instance, Fager did not only tell readers about the upheavals and infighting in various Quaker organizations in issue #25, but also suggested ways for staff to reduce such conflicts with new methods of organizational management. This two-pronged approach of reporting and giving advice is repeated in most issues of the newsletter dealing with controversy.

But *A Friendly Letter* is not only interested in resolving conflicts in Quakerism; it carries definite views and ideas on what the Friends should be and its editor is not hesitant to state them. In Issue #28 Fager defines his own particular viewpoint as "Ecumenical Christian Inclusivist": While taking Quakerism's Christian roots seriously this position does not see it as a "warrant for the exclusion of other outlooks among us." Fager puts this view to use in his sympathetic coverage of vastly different Quaker worlds. In Issue #37, for instance, he scored liberal Friends for anti-Christian prejudice in their meetings. And then in Issue #53, Fager wrote that universalism has a "legitimate place in the Quaker theological mix." Rather than being contradictory, this approach fits in with Fager's vision of a diverse yet unified Quaker movement, where different voices are allowed to be heard but not to out-shout each other.

A Friendly Letter is unique in religious journalism in this concern for diversity. For instance, *Forum Letter*, edited by Lutheran writer and controversialist Richard John Neuhaus is similar to Fager's letter in that they are among the few pan-denominational publications around today; that is, they attempt to cover all of Lutheranism and Quakerism rather than only one denomination. But the difference is that *Forum Letter* presses for one normative, "confessional" faith within Lutheranism; *A Friendly Letter* celebrates Quaker pluralism. Of course, Fager recognizes that there are limits to such diversity, but as he admits in issue # 28, Inclusivists have a "hard time deciding where the limits of out inclusiveness ought to be." From reading the *A Friendly Letter* corpus it seems that there are two boundaries that Fager refuses to cross on Quaker identity: pacifism and the historical teaching of the Inner Light. From these two touchstones, Fager takes a good many other issues seriously (such as the Christian tradition and silent worship).

One issue in particular, however, has been the most problematic test for the newsletter's concern for Quaker pluralism-within-unity: homosexuality. Fager has made it clear that he is for the acceptance of those with a homosexual lifestyle by meetings; he also realizes that conservatives have problems with this since it goes against what they see as biblical authority. To take a stand on this issue--which can and has caused denominational schisms--is a risky decision for an editor of a newsletter focusing on Quaker unity to make. Because this issue touches on central matters of religious authority and personal acceptance and rejection within local meetings, any attempt at bridge-building in this area may not meet with much success. In that case, Fager may have reasoned, why not take a stand?

Wide-Ranging and Unpredictable in Coverage

One surprise in reading through the *A Friendly Letter* collection was the unpredictability of subject matter. Most of the things I--and many other outsiders--have associated with liberal to moderate Quakerism such as, disarmament, South African and Central American concerns, feminism, sanctuary, gay rights, are featured far less in the newsletter than matters of Quaker belief and practice. This may be a way of making up for doctrinal issues being underplayed in recent times. But the newsletter has demonstrated that any move toward greater Quaker unity will have to take place on the foundational-theological level as well on the practical level. Another surprise was that Fager has given little treatment to the abortion issue, which has caused considerable tension in other religious bodies. I am not so much looking for the newsletter to take a "pro" or "anti" stance as much as reporting on Friends' attitudes on abortion: would pro-life and pro-choice views fall into place along liberal-conservative, programmed-unprogrammed lines?

While *A Friendly Letter's* coverage of peace and justice issues has never been closely tied to the agenda of the religious left (I counted less than five references to liberation theology in all 72 issues), recent issues have been more critical of such concerns. This can be seen in issue #68, where Fager is critical of support for the Sandinistas and in his questioning of the value of revolution and socialism in issue #71. Regardless of what readers think of such criticism, they have to admit that it challenges them to reexamine and refine their own assumptions. By playing the gadfly and occasionally unsettling its readership, *A Friendly Letter* again shows why it deserves an esteemed place in the independent religious press and why it remains a stimulating commentary on Quakerism.

group's hard-won sense of community and summarized its sense of mission. This minute was presented to the first business sessions, with the clear though unstated hope that its adoption could short-circuit debate over the far more controversial Richmond Declaration. But this hope was forlorn; supporters of the Reaffirmation proposal did not see the Minute of Thanksgiving and Calling as answering their request, and even some of the Declaration's opponents agreed, wanting a chance to engage basic issues rather than another attempt to fuzz them over. They got their wish, and soon the body was close to the edge of the second, separationist option: It was broadly hinted, as it has often been before, that at least one Yearly Meeting might leave if the Richmond Declaration were not reaffirmed.

The Genesis of The Two O-Clock Minute

But then, after that late evening session, several Friends found themselves in the hallway outside the auditorium, arguing vehemently about the issues involved and how and whether they could be successfully dealt with within FUM. Included in this spontaneous, stubborn encounter were Friends of both pastoral and nonpastoral varieties, and they went round and round until a security guard closed the building, then continued on the steps outside. After another hour or so, what had begun as almost a shouting match, and continued as a strenuous argument, deepened into dialogue and, to the surprise of all involved, seemed at length to approach common ground. At that point, someone asked whether they could write a minute expressing what they arrived at. A draft was prepared, tinkered with, and then read aloud. One by one, all present said they could accept the minute, though at first they doubted that the others would. The statement in question, dubbed "the Two O-Clock Minute" after the hour of its composition, was brief, and worth quoting here in full: "Friends United Meeting is an organization that, amid the diverse body that is the Society of Friends today, comes together to witness and work based on a common commitment to Jesus Christ."

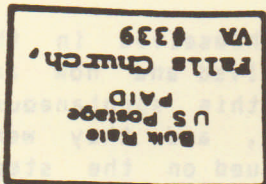
This statement seemed almost deceptively simple. Yet it offered crucial affirmative responses to the key concerns of each group, and a larger commitment of benefit to both: On the pastoral side, it confirmed a Christian identity and language for FUM; and on the nonpastoral side, it acknowledged the legitimacy of the diversity in Quakerdom at large. For both, it represented a resolve to take the third option as FUM's response to its differences, that of learning to make them constructive and saying a firm NO to separation.

A New Option Produces a New Beginning

As the weary drafters of this Two O-Clock Minute staggered off to bed, they did not know if their work would be of use to anyone else. Yet early Thursday afternoon, it came to the fore in response to the next crisis brought on by the conflict, over the Richmond Declaration. Lester Paulsen of Indiana, clerk of the Personnel Committee, was called to offer nominations for the FUM staff, but said he could not do so unless the session could reassure him that FUM was indeed a Christ-centered body. It turned out that some of the top staff, including General Secretary Steve Main, felt unable to serve without some such reassurance. A reaffirmation of the Richmond Declaration would have met this need; but this seemed increasingly unlikely. But without it, FUM as they had known it was tottering; where did that leave them? How could the contending viewpoints within it be reconciled? At this juncture the Two O-Clock Minute seemed to fill the gap: when shown it, the staff members and Paulsen all said they could live with it; so, on the other side, did Elizabeth Cazden. Thus it was put at the top of the agenda for that evening's session; and after some discussion and with some mild demurrals, it was approved. The staff nominations were then accepted.

With that, the crisis passed. Formal rejection of the Richmond Declaration reaffirmation proposal, a little later, seemed almost anticlimactic. The Declaration, after all, left FUM in the second option stance of presuming to define what was legitimate Quakerism; but under the Two O-Clock Minute, which was descriptive rather than prescriptive, FUM simply assumed its own, clearly Christian place within Quakerism. This self-definition was not only more modest--and more accurate; it had already shown itself to be more workable as well. How well this outcome will sit with some of the more evangelically-oriented FUM Yearly Meetings will likely be shown when they meet later this summer. But at this point, it seems that at Guilford Friends United Meeting gave up nothing but a destructive and arrogant fiction; in return, it may have put the ghost of 1827 to rest at long last, and in the process gained an opportunity to make a real future for itself in its second century.

INSIDE: FRIENDS UNITED MEETING
MAKES A NEW BEGINNING



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
P.O. Box 1361
Baileys Crossroads, VA 22041

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

In Sixth month of 1659, Quaker hopes in England were very high. They sent mounted Friends riding on fast horses through several of the counties where they had many supporters, gathering 15,000 signatures on a petition to Parliament. This revolutionary Parliament, known to history as the Rump, was to consider the question of abolishing tithes, the taxes collected by the government for the official church. The English revolutionaries, having executed king Charles I and broken the power of the Anglican bishops, had already set in motion great social changes. Now the Quakers, along with other religious radicals, were pressing them further: they demanded that the government not support **any church at all**, and commit the government to religious toleration. But this sounded like the next thing to anarchy to many of the leading Puritans and Presbyterians, who despised the idea of state-supported bishops but found state support of **their** clergy quite agreeable. On 6/27, the same day that the Quakers' petition was presented, the Rump voted, by a close margin, to continue the tithes. After that, it was mostly downhill for Friends for forty long years, before another revolutionary government adopted the Toleration Act of 1689.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Yes, there are even Quaker Jim and Tammy jokes. Here are two:

#1. Sources at the PTL Club advise us that when the Jessica Hahn-sex and money scandal first broke, Jim Bakker's initial impulse was to give up televangelism and become a Wilburite Friends minister. But the plan came a cropper when Tammy Faye got wind of it and declared that she wouldn't be caught **dead** wearing grey mascara.

#2. Popular evangelical Quaker writer Richard Foster had been asked several times to appear on the PTL club television show. Finally, late in 1986 he agreed, and a date was set for last March; the topic of conversation was to be his latest book, and wouldn't you know its title is **Money, Sex and Power**. However, when the day for the interview arrived, there was not only a new, substitute host for the show, but Foster was also asked to change the focus of discussion to an earlier book of his, a sober volume called **A Celebration of Discipline**.

(NOTE: #2 is said to be a true story, and thanks to Howard Macy of Friends University for passing it along.)