

# A Friendly Letter

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Seventh Month, 1987

Dear Friend,

The first reaction to the Friends United Meeting Triennial's decision not to reaffirm the Richmond Declaration, reported in issue #75, has come in: Southwest Yearly Meeting, which brought the unsuccessful reaffirmation proposal, met beginning 7/11, and after long debate turned back proposals to leave FUM. The Triennial's move to recognize the diverse character of FUM's constituency brought into focus the fact that Southwest, far from being the solid fundamentalist monolith some other FUMers thought, is also diverse, and deeply divided over how to relate to the rest of Quakerdom. Some demanded that Southwest leave FUM and join the Evangelical Friends Alliance; others insisted just as strongly that it should stay in FUM; and for the moment, the latter carried the day.

Division within Southwest had indeed already surfaced at the Triennial. To placate those who want to leave, Southwest's FUM delegates were instructed to "speak strongly" about their beliefs at the FUM fall board meetings. One wonders, though, if they will also speak truly about their own internal divisions. Certainly such a more honest and humble presentation from Southwest is long past due, and would serve it far better in FUM than attempts to prop up its old, discredited image as the self-appointed defenders of some self-defined true orthodoxy.

For many years FUM evaded the truth about its diversity, in good measure to help Southwest and some of its other YMs to avoid having to face up to their own internal conflicts. But those days are now past. FUM, greatly to its credit, is undertaking to live with the fact of its diversity, and all its members will have to come to terms with this new, constructive reality. We will be monitoring additional reactions to the changes in FUM from other YMs as the summer proceeds.

Another gathering worth taking note of was Friends General Conference, at Oberlin College in Ohio, 7/4-7/11. As forecast, it did attract a record high attendance, with 1801 registered and 1735 actually showing up. So the signs of vitality in that sector of Quakerism continue to pile up. There is plenty of diversity along with that vitality too, however, and while most of us rejoice in that most of the time, this month's article takes a look at one of the difficult tasks that it can have produced.

Yours in the Light,

*Chuck Fager*

Chuck Fager

PS. We forgot to mention last month that Richard Cimino, Editor of *Religion Watch*, who wrote the evaluation of AFL's first six years included in that issue, is offering subscriptions to his newsletter to AFL readers at a discount rate of \$12.95 per year. Write to: *Religion Watch*, P.O. Box 652, North Bellmore NY 11710.



## A LIBERAL QUAKER MEETING LEARNS TO DRAW THE LINE

Gospel Order. It's a venerable old Quaker phrase, though one not often heard today, especially among liberal Friends. Recently, however, the very liberal Cambridge Meeting in Massachusetts has been undergoing a crash course in Gospel Order; and its decision in the case ought to reverberate far and wide among unprogrammed Friends: What happened? This. For the first time in its history, Cambridge Meeting has disowned an active member for cause. In the process it punched a big hole in one of the weightiest of liberal Quaker shibboleths.

Here are the details: Late last fall a meeting member, John van der Meer, asked to meet with a clearness committee to discuss how to be more open with the meeting about a particular conviction of his, namely pedophilia: he believed that sexual relationships between adults and children can be good for the children involved; and he has acted on that conviction. Several meeting members already knew of this belief, and disagreed with it; even so, a committee met with him several times. In one such meeting in Second Month this year, Van de Meer disclosed that he had had a sexual contact with a young boy from a meeting family.

### *Taking a Stand, and Taking Action*

This revelation shocked the committee, and they reported it both to the First Day School Committee, with which van der Meer had been active, and to the meeting Ministry and Counsel Committee. He was asked not to attend any functions where children were present, and parents of First Day School children were also informed. The resulting uproar yielded a series of meetings, three of which produced specific actions: On 4/2, a called business meeting decided to report the incident to the state Department of Social Services, realizing that this could produce criminal charges against van der Meer. (It has done so; he now faces a probable jail sentence.) Three days later, another called business meeting adopted the following minute: "Friends Meeting at Cambridge considers any sexual involvement of an adult with a child to be abuse of the child by the adult. Such behavior must be condemned."

The session noted that van der Meer had made it clear he did not agree with this minute and had expressed no regret at his action. It was on this basis that his membership was challenged. The New England Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* lists only two specific grounds for "discontinuance", as it is called there: habitual lack of attendance at or support for a meeting. Beyond that, it refers vaguely to "a lack of unity with Friends" or "conduct unbecoming a Friend." This lack of unity was cited at another called business meeting on 4/23, at which his discontinuance was agreed to after lengthy discussion.

### *A Remarkable Case, With Wide Implications*

There are several notable aspects to this series of events. First of all, despite the fact that emotions were running high, Cambridge Meeting has been careful to follow the requirements of its *Faith and Practice*. But it has gone beyond the *Faith and Practice*, in line with the tenets of Gospel Order. These were laid down in the earliest disciplinary advices to Friends, which were based in turn on statements by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17, in that some members have continued to meet and labor with van der Meer about his actions and convictions, hoping that some change of heart and reconciliation might be possible. (This is in sharp, positive contrast to the response of a meeting in Florida faced with a similar situation {reported in AFL#49}, which reacted with a kind of panicked informal banishment.)

For that matter, van der Meer's response is also noteworthy: while excluded from regular First Day worship by the presence of children, he has been allowed to continue to attend Cambridge's midweek worship meetings, and has in fact attended them frequently up to the time this was written. He said in an interview for this article that he had done so because he identified with Friends and felt some commitment to the process that was underway, and felt he had been treated fairly even if he did not agree with some of the actions taken.

Even more striking, he stated to me that on further reflection, and with more information about the effect of his action, he had now come to see that what he did was wrong and harmful to the child involved. And while he still thinks that some such involvements could potentially be positive, that he personally was not able to make such a judgment for himself, and that he now plans to avoid any further sexual involvements with children.



**JOHN PUNSHON  
ON QUAKERISM--  
A NEW TAPED INTERVIEW**

**A PROVOCATIVE BRITISH PERSPECTIVE**

John Punshon is Tutor in Quaker Studies at the Woodbrooke Center of London yearly Meeting. He is the author of *Portrait In Gray*, a history of Friends, and the newly-published *Encounter With Silence*, which describes his personal spiritual journey. In this interview, during his recent visit to America, he reflects on the prospects and problems of Quakerism both in Britain and in the United States. He also discusses such topics as the Richmond Declaration of Faith, the future of Friends United Meeting, Friends' expanding encounter with other faiths such as Islam, and the challenge of defining a Quaker identity for our time. He also candidly describes some of the deep evolution of his own religious outlook in recent years.

**JACK POWELSON ON FACING SOCIAL REVOLUTION**

Quaker economist Jack Powelson's challenging new book, *Facing Social Revolution*, is the subject of this interview by Chuck Fager. In it Powelson outlines some of the book's ideas, and explains how they grew out of his professional experience and religious pilgrimage. Running time approx. 60 minutes.

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These statements could open a new round in his relationship to the meeting. Members have told me that a major factor in the discontinuance debate of Fourth Month was van der Meer's lack of regret or "repentance" for his action. Van der Meer agreed that that had been the case; but now it seems to be changing. So what will the meeting do? In the past, under Gospel Order a disowned member who repented publicly could be readmitted. Further, what concern should the meeting show him during the prison term he is likely to face as a result of its having reported him? (In the Florida situation, the offender served more than three years in very oppressive conditions, in virtual isolation from the Friends meeting he had once been part of.) This is a situation worth watching as it continues to unfold.

It is also worth watching, in my view, for reasons beyond its intrinsic drama and interest. As I said in the beginning, by thus taking a clear stand on a matter of belief and behavior--by drawing a line--Cambridge Meeting has not only broken with its own past; it has taken a large step away from one of the reigning convictions of liberal unprogrammed Quakerism, what could be called the Sincerity Standard: namely that in matters of membership and discipline all that really matters is a person's **sincerity** in his or her seeking. And Cambridge has challenged this in an exemplary Quaker way, applying the tradition of Gospel Order. This seems to me an important, even possibly a landmark occurrence. To explain why requires a detour through some personal, nonjournalistic reflections, having to do with the issue of limits and values among liberal Friends, among which I include myself.

### ***Second Thoughts About the "Sincerity Standard"***

Perhaps John van der Meer put it best when he pointed out that Cambridge Meeting, which from its founding has prided itself on being noncreedal, has now set up an explicit criterion for membership, limiting it to non-pedophiles. This may be, he acknowledged, a reasonable standard; but he wondered whether questions about more traditional Friends' testimonies, or its Christian basis, might not more properly come first. He conceded that from him such questions might sound self-serving, but they strike home nonetheless.

How often have I heard it said among liberal Friends that we have no business making judgments about the beliefs and actions of those among us as long as they are sincere seekers? I have felt much sympathy for this view, especially in situations where it was counterposed against attitudes which seemed obsolete, or aimed at excluding people I thought deserved a place in Quaker fellowship. And how many of us have done things which, in days of old, would have been more than sufficient grounds for disownment? I certainly have.

### ***Facing Up to the Task of Defining Limits***

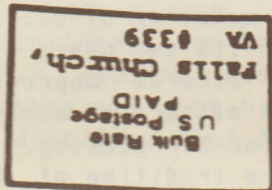
Yet John van der Meer, all reports agree, was **sincere** in his pedophilia; most pedophiles are. And in the oldest of Quaker traditions, he acted on his beliefs. Over the years, I have seen several meetings face similar cases focussed on various tough issues, and typically they have ducked or fudged. These cases have left me very doubtful as to the adequacy of the Sincerity Standard as a basis for a healthy Quaker community life. Furthermore, experience persuades me that liberal Quakers like every other group do in fact have our limits; yet we kid ourselves that we don't, so newcomers learn about the limits mainly when one oversteps them. And then, to maintain the myth, their enforcement is too often via mainly passive aggressive means. Generally, that is, we don't disown people; instead we freeze them out, as the Florida meeting did. Such treatment is undoubtedly our least attractive feature.

But how are we to move beyond the Sincerity Standard without sliding us back into the bad old days of dogmatism and mass disownments? After all, any judgments or rules we make would unquestionably be fallible and provisional, subject to revision in the light of continuing revelation. But does the certainty of imperfection relieve us of the responsibility of defining who we are, and what we can tolerate? And can we do that without facing the prospect of possibly excluding some things and possibly some persons?

These too are very good questions. But as the ordeal in Cambridge shows, they are questions, I believe, which liberal Friends will be increasibly unable to escape. As we begin to face up to them, let us hope that the tradition of Gospel Order will also be rediscovered. As Cambridge Meeting's experience also shows, it is worth the effort.



INSIDE: DISOWNED!  
A LIBERAL QUAKER MEETING  
DRAWS THE LINE



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

In the first three days of Seventh Month, 1863, the climactic battle of the American Civil War took place at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. More than 50,000 soldiers of North and South were killed in the fighting. Among the Confederate soldiers was a Quaker farmer named William Hockett from Guilford County, North Carolina. Hockett had been conscripted the month before, and while he held fast to his Quaker rejection of war, did not refuse the call to report to the military authorities. He wrote of this that "I was shown a vision that I would be carried off to the war and have to suffer many things." And despite his fears at leaving his wife and two children, he said, "I was clearly shown that...if I was obedient to manifest duty, I should return with the reward of peace and find all well."

Hockett refused to wear a uniform or carry a rifle, even though one had been forcibly tied to his back, and he likewise declined to do army support work. He had been threatened repeatedly with being shot for his recalcitrance, but did not waver in his stand. During the height of the battle, he sat quietly reading his Bible. But he was hardly unaffected by what happened. On 7/3/1863 he wrote: "It is a sight I never wish to behold again. Hundreds of people wounded in nearly every part of the body...some dying, some already dead and lying out on the yard until holes can be dug for them." During the southern forces' retreat from Gettysburg, Hockett was captured by Union forces, held prisoner for several weeks, then released after appeals by Philadelphia Friends to the White House. He finally returned home in Sixth Month, 1865.

### QUAKER CHUCKLES

Did thee see the cartoon, allegedly in "The Far Side" series, that showed several wide-eyed adolescent Friends gathered around a table, each with a hand stuck inside a container of breakfast cereal bearing a picture of a smiling man wearing a broadbrimmed hat? It seemed innocuous enough; but the caption read: "Young Quakers feeling their oats."

Furthermore, during the recent sessions of Friends United Meeting at Guilford College, a rumor circulated that a new bumper sticker was soon to be appearing on the automobiles of North Carolina Quakers, carrying the slogan: "Friends don't let Methodists drive drunk either."

--With apologies to Gary Larson and thanks to Andrew Secrest