

# A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Eighty-Four

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Third Month, 1988

Dear Friend,

Here is a footnote to last month's report on FBI surveillance of Friends groups active in Central America concerns: In his 1982 book, *The Puzzle Palace*, James Bamford examined the National Security Agency, a federal spy outfit bigger and more secret than the CIA. The NSA, concentrates on communications monitoring; apparently it can hear just about any telephone conversation anywhere in the world. And a former NSA official said that during the turbulent Vietnam years, one of his assignments was downright mind-boggling:

"When J. Edgar Hoover gives you a requirement for complete surveillance of all Quakers in the United States, when Richard M. Nixon is a Quaker and he's the President of the United States, it gets pretty funny." Bamford adds that "What caused the Quakers to be sucked into the NSA's vacuum cleaner, apparently, was Hoover's belief that the religious group was shipping food and supplies to Southeast Asia." (p.252)

Well, for heaven's sake, J. Edgar, *of course* Quakers were shipping relief supplies to Asia, at least some of us were; to Vietnam in particular, and both sides to boot. But some of us also did our best to let the government and the public know about it out front, to save you all that trouble.

What really worries me about this, though, is what the NSA staffers actually discovered if they did listen in on all those Quaker phone conversations. Can thee imagine how much it hurt our image when they discovered what we *really* talked about most of the time—not Vietnam or any such radical stuff, but where to find more First Day School teachers, or the arguments about how to renovate the meeting house, or how to cut down on the number of announcements at the end of meeting for worship? Oh, the shame of it!

Well, enough of such paranoia-mongering; there are other things to attend to. One of them

is to note that with this issue *A Friendly Letter* is seven years old! Also, its circulation has reached 700, which is higher than ever. That's great, but we need more, as noted below.

I also hope thee has noticed some changes in our appearance. These are due to the acquisition of a new computer and printer, and the outcome of many long hours spent making the transition from C\PM to DOS and from Wordstar to WordPerfect. The new printer is supposed to make the type look better, and the ragged right columns are supposed to be easier on the eye. As always, I'll be anxious to have your reaction.

One other change coming as this issue goes out is a BIG jump in postal rates, bigger for bulk mail like this than for first class letters. What this means, of course, is a jump in costs which many publications will soon be passing along to you in subscription rate hikes.

I want to stave off such a rate increase here as long as possible; but to keep it at bay, I will need your help. One way to do that is to increase the letter's subscription list; a proposal regarding that is enclosed. Another is to seek out more outside advertising, like the flyer from Jack Powelson which is also inserted herewith. I have heard from readers who dislike such inserts, and I must ask them to bear with me on this, because the alternative seems worse.

One last note: Keep those cards coming in for our opinion poll on the desirability of a Unitarian-Friends General Conference merger; we'll report the results soon.

Yours In the Light,

*Chuck Fager*

Chuck Fager



The debate in many Friends meetings over same sex marriage (SSM for short) has been hard to get a journalistic handle on. It hasn't fit my usual approach of reporting issues and events not being covered by other Quaker publications.

That's because whatever one thinks of it, SSM is not being swept under the rug. For instance, the 3/88 issue of *Friends Bulletin*, Pacific Yearly Meeting's monthly, is dominated by heated expressions on the subject; and this is the third issue in less than a year in which the topic has been a major focus of attention. It has also been cropping up in *Friends Journal*, most recently (3/88) in an announcement of a female couple's wedding in its Marriages section. And just a passing reference to SSM in our issue #77(8/87) was enough to evoke several long, thoughtful letters.

#### *Even In Indiana*

This writing reflects the fact that Friends all over the nation are acting on SSM, talking and threshing about it, and in not a few cases tearing their hair out over it. Mostly this involves unprogrammed groups, such as the Friends Meeting of Washington, D.C. FMW may indeed be an extreme case, in that SSM has been before its Marriage and Family Relations Committee for four years, with no unity on the matter yet in sight. Feelings there have been running high of late; the first draft of FMW's 1987 Spiritual State of the Meeting report devoted its longest section to this struggle, lamenting that "unease...mutual anger and disrespect on both sides remains."

But such debates are not entirely confined to unprogrammed groups; the predominantly pastoral Quakers of Western Yearly Meeting in Indiana were recently presented with a minute supporting SSM by its North Meadow Circle of Friends in Indianapolis. And after adopting its minute last spring, North Meadow

in Tenth Month married a female couple under its care. It was this marriage that was mentioned in the recent *Friends Journal* notice.

To be sure, North Meadow is an anomaly in Western YM; an admittedly liberal outpost, it holds joint membership in the unprogrammed Ohio Valley YM. Even so, North Meadow Friends have tried to be non-provocative in spreading the word of their actions among Western's generally more conservative constituency.

Their task was complicated late last fall by a seemingly unrelated development in Kokomo, which is the hub for several strongly evangelical Western YM churches: Last Eleventh Month, the Kokomo daily *Tribune* ran a short article reporting that the American Friends Service Committee had endorsed the huge gay and lesbian rights march on Washington.

#### *Scratch That Headline*

The article was accurate, and unremarkable, except for the headline, which read, "Friends Support Gay Rights Rally". This was entirely too sweeping, at least as far as four area Friends pastors were concerned; they all fired off letters to the *Tribune*, and one visited the religion reporter, to carefully distinguish between their kind of Friends and the AFSC, with its pro-gay rights notions, which they wanted nothing to do with.

Soon after this a long letter was published in the 2/88 *Friends Journal* from a heterosexual couple, Ellen Hodge and Michael Fallahay, who had been married not long before at North Meadow. The letter declared that, as a sign of solidarity with gays and lesbians whose unions were unrecognized by society, they had chosen not to register their own marriage with the state. Their union remains under the care of their meeting, but outside the law.

The upshot of all this is not hard to imagine. There have been rumors of churches threatening to leave Western YM if North Meadow were not obliged to recant its stand. Since three churches have left the YM in the past twenty years or so over various doctrinal hassles, such talk is not to be taken lightly. And North Meadow was on the agenda of Western's interim Administrative Council session held earlier this month.

#### *A Teapot Tempest?*

But after making some inquiries, it sounds to me as if there may be somewhat less here than meets the eye. The Administrative Council's discussion with North Meadow Friends reportedly was cordial; it will be continued at the YM sessions this summer, but I have been unable thus far to turn up any sense of impending crisis, or any firebrands exploiting the issue. (True, the Hemlock Meeting in Kokomo has withheld that portion of its assessment to the YM which goes toward Western's corporate contribution to the AFSC. But the amount involved is only about \$17; Western is not a major AFSC contributor.) Western has grappled with proposals to formally condemn homosexuality before, and managed to sidestep the issue, walking a tightrope between loud voices on either side. The group seems blessed with the presence of a goodly number of solid and level-headed Friends, basically traditional in their outlook but able to face issues like these resolutely and without panic. All our YMs should be so lucky.

Similarly, at the Friends Meeting of Washington, the draft State of the Meeting report allowed that some Friends perceived that a "steam roller movement" in favor of SSM was underway. Some steamroller, that pushes for four years without reaching its goal; Quaker process survives at FMW.



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Jack Powelson is traveling with a mission (or "under concern"). If this were two centuries ago, he would be on his horse, going from Meeting to Meeting. But with more Friends to reach, he has traveled by car, with book.

In 1973, Jack decided that his career as economic advisor in the third world conflicted with his values as a Quaker. He had consulted with Presidents, Ministers, and others at senior level. But he had also wandered about urban slums and farms in the boondocks, talking to the poor and to radical students. Then he turned to history, to try to fathom reasons for the massive chasm between rich and poor.

In *Facing Social Revolution*, he told about his "two journeys," one his personal encounters in the third world and what made him change his mind, and the other a journey through history.

Now, in *Dialogue with Friends*, he tells about his "third journey," through Quakerdom in 1987. He started out seeking the reaction of Friends to *Facing Social Revolution*. But Friends had so many other concerns for an economist (see list on opposite side) that *Dialogue* includes many topics not in *Facing*. Either book may be read first.

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**Send** me the names of Friends and friends who don't get A Friendly Letter but who you think would enjoy it. That's all.

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closer to "supporting" and "sticking to"; in fact, when this verse is quoted in Greek in the New Testament, the word used literally means "glued to".

Likewise with "one flesh"; the Hebrew and Greek terms can imply sex, but they can also mean kinship or fellowship, and all that makes up a whole human being; thus this "cleaving" to the "suitable helper" makes up a new and more complete humanity.

#### *The Old and The New*

But in the Bible, marriage has implications which go far beyond the individuals involved. It is repeatedly used as a metaphor for the relationship of God to the people. Indeed, the whole book of Hosea is organized around this image: Hosea's wife is flagrantly adulterous, and the prophet's anger, grief, and longing for restoration are taken as a revelation of God's relationship and response to the unfaithful nation of Israel.

This image of marriage as the paradigm of the divine-human relationship is continued in the New Testament. Paul in Ephesians 5:32 calls it "a profound mystery," which embodies the relationship between Christ and the church. Moreover, in the Book of Revelation, at the visionary climax of all history when the "new heaven and new earth" appears, it comes in the form of a city, the New Jerusalem; but the city is described as being "prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband." (Rev. 21:2)

I find it intriguing that in all these images, the focus is on the relationship between spouses. While reproduction can certainly be inferred, it is not mentioned. This is a very different emphasis from the one I grew up with, as a pre-Vatican Two Catholic. A glance at Catholic thinking may be useful here, since it represents one of the widest and most ancient streams of interpretation in our tradition. And the tradition, in the late

fifties anyway, was clear. As my high school religion text put it firmly, "*the essential primary purpose of marriage is the procreation and proper rearing of children.*" (Their italics.)

It added, almost grudgingly, that there were also "essential secondary purposes", namely "*the salvation of the souls of husband and wife*" through mutual assistance and what is delicately called "*the quieting of concupiscence....*" (Again, their italics.) Thus from this perspective, if producing children without marriage was a sin, having a marriage without producing children was a tragedy.

#### *The Council and the Family*

But that was in the bad old days. The Second Vatican Council a few years later issued documents on marriage which dramatically revised this emphasis. The Council returned to the biblical images of marriage as the archetype of divine-human connection, affirming that "authentic married love is caught up into divine love and...can lead the spouses to God with powerful effect...." While still very enthusiastic about children, the Council carefully avoided setting up a hierarchy of purposes for matrimony; the editor of its declaration noted that it "cannot be read as a judgment on the relative importance or primacy of ends." This was a major shift, and brought Catholicism back in line not only with the Biblical images, but also with the thought of most other Christian groups.

Can this brief review of traditional images help us with the question of what to call same sex unions? I believe it can. Friends, after all, do not simply submit to tradition, but use it in our search for continuing revelation, which affects how we understand the past as well as how we face the future.

#### *Queries On the Question*

Even from the traditional

perspective, it seems clear to me that, contrary to the views of my Catholic mentors and some Friends, neither sex nor children are the main elements of marriage; rather, the keystone is the relationship between the partners, seen as both an archetype and a manifestation of the divine-human relationship. And in weighing a proposed marriage, of any sort, as a meeting does in the clearness process, the questions that arise from tradition would be something like these:

Have the partners shown themselves acting as "suitable helpers" to each other in the "salvation of their souls," or as we might prefer to put it, in strengthening their ability to perceive and follow the Light of Christ within them? Are they determined to "cleave" to one another steadfastly, forming a loving fellowship that holds promise of producing a new creation, a more complete humanity?

If one could answer these queries favorably of a mixed sex couple, they would easily gain clearness. But for an equally qualified same sex couple, should the additional matter of gender be a controlling criterion for considering their union as a "marriage"? Clearly for some Friends of good will it should. My own leadings, however, point in the other direction, suggesting that to do so places an assumption of the tradition above the elements that are its repeated, specific focus.

I have seen same sex unions which seem as close to these biblical standards as many heterosexual marriages, or closer. These reflections leave me unable to justify making mixed gender a criterion for calling such unions marriages. This feels like "continuing revelation," yet one mindful of tradition, which as I read Quaker history is how it is supposed to be. I hope these thoughts can be of some use to Friends grappling with this question.



Both these situations show the exertions the SSM issue is producing among Friends. Yet in looking them over and considering the reports of many other meetings' labors, the sense remains that detailed reports on specific cases are less needed now than a closer look at some of the issues involved.

Of these, none has proven more difficult than whether a same sex union, when recognized by a meeting, can rightly be termed a "marriage." In many meetings heterosexual Friends are ready to welcome gays and lesbians, and willing to affirm stable and committed relationships among them. Yet again and again, the sticking point has been what to call them.

### *A Word That Goes Deep*

This should not be surprising, because more than semantics is involved here. Marriage is a central social institution; it has been entwined with religion from time immemorial; what we believe and do about it expresses some of our deepest convictions about life.

Unfortunately, most of the arguments I have heard Friends make on both sides of this "What shall we call it?" question have not been very satisfactory, because they have not dealt with the main task, which is to define the meaning of marriage from a Quaker perspective.

Instead, those who oppose calling same sex unions marriages have tended to raise utilitarian or frankly homophobic objections: These have included fears that, as one Washington Friend put it, approving SSM would "send the wrong message" to impressionable youth, and influence some to become gay or lesbian. Others have contended that the designation of marriage ought to be reserved for relationships that are legal. Still others contend simply that homosexuality is evil, and to ratify such relationships is likewise wrong.

More sympathetic critics have

argued that, at bottom, the essence of marriage necessarily presupposes two elements, namely a heterosexual couple and the prospect of "normal" childbearing. In this light, a same sex relationship, whatever its other virtues, should not be called a marriage anymore than brussel sprouts should be called ice cream; they are just not the same things, as any hungry child could explain.

### *The Importance of the Word*

A Washington state Friend, Sally Bryan, made such a case in the 1/88 *Friends Bulletin*. "I ask that we preserve the word, marriage, in its traditional use," she wrote. "It is specific, well-understood and an accepted form...." She urged us to "respect this word we have inherited, with its time-tested promise that the complementary wholeness possible only when one man and one woman commit themselves... to each other, stands open to each person," adding that "marriage is a form that history, culture, religion have set." In it, man and wife "are entering an indispensable part of human living, linking two selves to the cyclic in human begetting, just as the seasons circle...."

Friend Bryan's letter sums up well the central reservations some Friends who are otherwise accepting of lesbian and gay Friends have about SSM. Regrettably, the responses to these concerns I have read fail to address these points directly. Instead, they usually frame the issue as one of equality among Friends. There should be, they insist, no second-class Quakers; and marriage is a prerogative of membership; hence no members should be denied that right, regardless of the gender of the couple involved. It was as a testimony to such equality that the heterosexual couple from North Meadow declined to register their own marriage with the state.

I fully agree that there should be no second-class Quakers. Yet the concerns of Sally Bryan and others are not thereby addressed,

and they deserve to be. That is, what answer can be given by advocates of SSM to the question, what is the meaning and the essential elements of marriage among Friends today, and can same sex unions properly be included within this understanding?

Are we to be content with the "traditional" man-woman form of marriage? Has this form really been dictated by "history, culture, religion", as Sally Bryan asserts? And as a religious body, what, in particular, does our religious tradition really have to say about the essence of marriage?

### *The Word On The Word*

Considering such questions, I turn first where Fox and early Friends turned, to the Bible—not as an infallible lawbook, but as a religious resource of singular value. And the first thing that turns up there is that the form and meaning of marriage are not dictated in the Bible with precision, in the way that, say, the Ten Commandments are listed. Instead, what one finds is a series of very rich and suggestive images, from which elaborate theologies have been built.

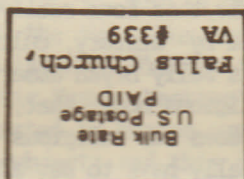
Take for instance the first two of these, in the second chapter of Genesis, in Verse 18 where God decides to make a "helpmate" for the prototypical first human, and then in verse 24, which speaks of a man leaving his parents to "cleave" to his wife, with whom he then becomes "one flesh."

It is important to note that the original ancient Hebrew words are themselves bundles of numerous possible meanings, which makes translation both difficult and exciting. The term "helpmate" is one such; it comes from a root which has also been rendered as "suitable helper," or "the one corresponding to" the original human. And "cleave," which many interpreters take as a reference to sexual union, has a meaning much



INSIDE: QUAKERS AND SAME SEX "MARRIAGE"---  
WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Address Correction Requested



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter  
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Baileys Crossroads, VA 22041

### THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

It was in Third Month of 1942 that a batch of new conscientious objectors arrived at the Patapsco, Maryland Civilian Public Service (CPS) camp in Maryland, run by the American Friends Service Committee. One of them was named Corbett Bishop. Bishop was not a Quaker, but all the early CPS camps were run by one or another of the traditional peace churches, Brethren, Mennonites or Friends. The Brethren and Mennonites preferred to fill their camps from their own ranks; so the Quaker camps were where you found COs of all varieties, some conventional and cooperative in their outlook, and some not.

Corbett Bishop was one of the latter. COs in World War Two were expected to work in CPS for the duration of the war plus several months, without pay. And while the sponsoring groups like AFSC handled the day-to-day camp operations, including paying the bills, all CPS policies were set by the Selective Service System in Washington, which was run by army officers. Neither the COs nor the churches much liked this arrangement, but most

accepted it as the most recognition of their pacifist principles they were going to get. Corbett Bishop decided he could not accept it.

Within a few months he had tangled with Selective Service over various rules, and began a protest fast, which lasted for forty-four days and landed him in a hospital. By Third Month of 1943 he was just finishing another fast, this time in sympathy with a campaign by Gandhi.

By the following summer, Bishop had vowed to break completely with CPS and what he called its "slave labor system," and was fasting again. By then the AFSC was urging Selective Service to discharge him from CPS, or at least take him off their hands. The government officials, however, were determined to show him who was boss, and the ensuing test of wills lasted until Third Month, 1946, when after 426 days of fasting, several arrests and trials, and more than six months of complete non-cooperation in prison, Bishop was released unconditionally.

### QUAKER CHUCKLE

From Friend Ben Vincent in England comes the story of a Quaker jockey. He had been a slight youth, much dominated by a formidable British Quaker mother. She had taken him to Meeting and First Day School, then packed him off to a Friends boarding school, and never allowed him to play soldiers or card games or such like. As a young man, though, liking horses, he became first a stable boy and then a jockey. But then along came

World War Two, the draft, and a summons for him. Naturally he registered as a CO, and was soon examined by a CO tribunal. At first the Tribunal members went easy on him because of his Quaker heritage, but soon they flung the old chestnut at him: "All this pacifism may be very well, but what would you do if you saw a German attacking your mother?" After thinking for a minute, he said, "I'd lay ten to one on the old girl."