

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Sixty-Nine

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Twelfth Month, 1986

Dear Friend,

There was a fine article in the Tenth Month issue of the Evangelical Friend that deserves wider notice. It was titled "Extremism and its Antidote," by Lee Nash, a Vice President and Dean at George Fox College in Oregon.

The article states its thesis boldly, paraphrasing The Communist Manifesto: "A specter stalks American Christendom--the specter of extremism. It denigrates scholarship, attacks truth, and undermines the ministry of Christian colleges and seminaries." Nash names some of the numerous witchhunts currently loose among evangelical Christians: those who see "New Age heresies" in practically everybody, even such staunch evangelicals as Richard Foster; the biblical literalists who insist that a true Christian must believe the earth is less than 10,000 years old; and theological right-wingers who forced a major evangelical youth conference to drop a speaker named Tony Campolo for espousing the Quakerish notion that there may be that of God and Christ in everyone, and not just certain born-again types.

This is good stuff, which some Friends need to hear more of, as you will see in this month's article. My only quibble with Nash comes when he is defining the antidote to this extremist poison: "...without exception the extremists take an eccentric view of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They're off center, which means that their Christology, their view of Christ, is not the focus of their faith....we are least confused, most inspired, most energized, when we are most Christ-centered."

My experience, however, suggests it's not that simple. Many of these extremists indeed focus on doctrinal side issues; but others have a perfectly "orthodox" Christology; their problem is rather one of arrogance: they have somehow decided it is up to them to judge the authenticity of the faith of others, and to make those judgments stick. Such crusaders, and Friends have faced our share of them recently, don't need a better Christology as much as they need lessons in Christian humility, tolerance, and respect for those who differ. When these are lost, you can't tell the Christians from the Crusaders by their Christology.

This caveat is not meant to minimize the value of theological clarity. Nor does it diminish my gratitude to Lee Nash and the Evangelical Friend for standing up against what is becoming a major plague within the evangelical world, and has caused Friends more than our portion of trouble. I hope we will hear more such forthright witness from that quarter of the Society; we have need of it.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

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FUM AND THE NEW MAN IN THE MIDDLE

Beginning next month, Friends United Meeting will get a new Administrative Secretary, its top staff position: Steve Main, the current Superintendent of Iowa Yearly Meeting. He comes to FUM at a time when it faces a fourfold set of intertwined challenges: The turnover of all but one of its top staff; a major financial deficit; renewed internal tensions and the need to face up to the task of defining its identity and mission. That's enough to keep any group stretched to the limit; for FUM, it could well portend a clouded and uncertain future.

Other significant FUM staff changes include the departure by spring of Field Secretary Jack Kirk, who also edits the FUM magazine Quaker Life. Jack Kirk's successor has not been selected, and Quaker Life will reportedly be edited on a temporary, part-time basis through the end of 1987. In addition, the post of Meeting Ministries Secretary is also currently being staffed on an interim basis. Further, the entire top-level job structure is likely to be reshuffled, if recommendations to this effect are accepted by the FUM Triennial next summer. Currently the Administrative Secretary and Field Secretary positions are equal in status at the top; the new plan would merge them into a single General Secretary's position.

Facing FUM's Fourfold Challenge

FUM's financial weakness is serious and persistent: It is facing a deficit for 1986 that could run as high as \$90,000, and has accumulated an overall indebtedness of close to \$200,000. Early this year it launched an ambitious \$1.5 million capital campaign; reports as to the progress of this effort vary, from optimistic to pessimistic depending on who you talk to. Its financial distress is very likely related to the fact that organizationally, FUM has been racked by chronic internal tensions, focussed on various issues but springing ultimately from the unreconciled diversity of Quaker practice and belief it encompasses; it is by no means clear that FUM can successfully continue to stretch and include this diversity without some cracks and splits. The latest focus of this tension will likely be doctrinal, as FUM will confront, at its upcoming Triennial next Sixth Month, a proposal to reaffirm the controversial Richmond Declaration of Faith. The Richmond Declaration will be one hundred years old in 1987, and it has been dividing Friends for almost every one of those years; 1987 is likely to be no exception. However that turns out, the Triennial will also be asked to launch a three-year, FUM-wide self-study aimed at redefining the body's basis of unity and sense of mission. Such an effort in self-examination and definition is long overdue, but is for that same reason a risky venture: there is more than one YM which, if it really stops to consider the matter, might well conclude that FUM is not the place it wants to be.

Steve Main: Stepping Into the Hot Seat

Steve Main, the new Administrative Secretary, is no stranger to situations of conflict; when he became Iowa YM Superintendent in 1982, his biggest task was to mend the internal divisions created by a fierce struggle over whether the YM should continue to be affiliated with the Friends Committee on National Legislation. (This controversy was reported in our issues #2, #5 and #14.) He has also seen FUM from the inside, as clerk of its Personnel Committee. Not surprisingly, he said in an interview for this article that working on behalf of greater unity within FUM will be a major priority for him. To this end, he said he expects to spend considerable effort working to broaden his acquaintance with and understanding of the unprogrammed groups in FUM's constituency, since his own background has been exclusively pastoral. As that continues, he hopes to see the development of a meaningful "middle ground" position within the FUM spectrum, as the basis for building renewed constituency confidence in the organization. Such a middle ground position, he feels, would likely not satisfy some at either end of the spectrum, but could provide a sufficient basis for FUM's long-term health.

As he begins this effort, though, Main faces two major challenges, one personal and the other organizational. The personal challenge is overcoming the memory of his role in the disgraceful Elizabeth Watson-Friends Ministers Conference affair in 1984. This was reported in our issue #44, probably the most widely-read issue we ever published. The controversy centered around opposition to Friend Watson's selection as a major speaker at the Friends Ministers Conference held in Chicago in 1985, and cosponsored by FUM and the Evangelical

Friends Alliance. The objections were based on Elizabeth Watson's address to the 1984 FUM Triennial, in which she espoused a non-literalist approach to the Bible and suggested that there might be some persons in the kingdom of heaven "whose life styles and sexual preferences...are different from our own"--i.e., homosexuals. Steve Main was a major spokesman for those who thereafter insisted that these statements made Elizabeth Watson unacceptable as a Friends Ministers Conference speaker, and threatened to boycott the gathering if she was not replaced. The FUM General Board reaffirmed its invitation to her, in Tenth Month, 1984, but the uproar continued and she was replaced anyway.

Where Was The Middle Ground?

Steve Main's expressed desire to find a solid "middle ground" in FUM is surely sound; yet his key role in the drive against Elizabeth Watson raises many unpleasant questions about his actual ability to achieve such a perspective in the full spectrum of views within FUM. Where, after all, is concern for the "middle ground" shown in thus going along with using biblical literalism and intolerance of homosexuality as litmus tests for speakers at FUM-sponsored activities--and then joining in naked power tactics to bludgeon FUM into backing out of a firm commitment? And are we simply to ignore the fact that this campaign was mounted against the first woman invited to address a Friends Ministers Conference?

Main says he has no second thoughts about his actions, which he adds were intended only to save the Friends Ministers Conference from a boycott. He seems genuinely nonplussed at the disquiet the incident produced among many Friends, and wonders what else they should have expected in response to such controversial sentiments. But the answer to that is painfully simple: Elizabeth Watson, and the many Friends who respect both her and her views, expected disagreements among Quakers and Christians to be approached through patient, friendly dialogue based on tolerance and mutual respect. This is Gospel Order; it is what Quakers routinely recommend to warring governments; it is what the FUM General Board pleaded for at the time, and what he and the others so clearly spurned. I believe Steve Main is sincere in his desire to find a "middle ground" in FUM; but with this in his background, he will have to work very hard to convince many Friends that he can be open-minded enough to find it, and that they and their concerns can get a square deal in FUM under his administration.

The Other Challenge: Rethinking The Role of Quaker Life

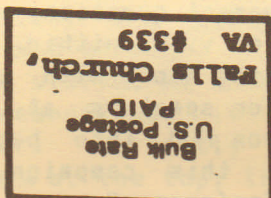
One important measure of Main's sincerity will be how he deals with the impending changes at Quaker Life. Quaker Life cannot help but play a central role in any genuine process of self-examination and definition within FUM; but the sad truth is that in recent years the magazine has served too often instead to avoid or distort such efforts.

Complaints about the content and direction of Quaker Life have been expressed by many Friends, particularly in the unprogrammed groups, and they were the focus of our issue #35, almost three years ago (See also #47). The specific concerns are easily enumerated: 1. Quaker Life has not been a reliable or timely source of information about the major issues before FUM; 2. Quaker Life has not served as a balanced and fair forum for dialogue among FUM Friends about issues of major concern; indeed, 3. Quaker Life has frequently been used to mount partisan attacks by circles within FUM's constituency, mainly from the conservative end, against other segments of the constituency, particularly liberal FUM Friends.

The response to these concerns has generally been to assert that Quaker Life is intended as an organ of uplift and inspiration, not news and controversy. And the present editor has consistently traveled mainly among groups of Friends which share this view. The trouble with this response is twofold: First, the record shows that, to the contrary, Quaker Life has repeatedly published highly controversial and demoralizing attacks on the views of more liberal FUM Friends; and second, like it or not there is simply no other medium through which reporting and discussion can be carried on within FUM's constituency on a regular basis. To turn Quaker Life into an honest and reliable forum for the reporting and dialogue which FUM wants and needs would not be difficult, even if this has been beyond the reach of its current leadership. Steve Main could make the changes if he wants to. Doing so would go a long way toward establishing him as a worthy leader of the body. It would also provide him the vehicle he needs to find the authentic "middle ground" which can give FUM the healthy future which its balance sheet among other indications clearly shows that it now lacks.

POSTMASTER: Time-dated newsletter. Do not delay.

INSIDE: SEEKING A FUTURE FOR
FRIENDS UNITED MEETING



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

It was in Twelfth Month of 1822 that Elias Hicks came to Philadelphia to visit and preach among Friends there. Hicks was a well-known minister from Long Island, New York, whose views on various doctrinal matters were alarming to most of the Orthodox elders of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In fact, Hicks's notions were so alarming that a delegation of elders made plans to confront and interrogate Hicks about them, in hopes of cutting short his speaking and travelling in their territory. A meeting was set for the afternoon of Thursday, the twelfth, at Green Street Meeting. Seven elders arrived, expecting to have Hicks to themselves; but they found him instead in the company of a large number of his local supporters, some of them very weighty in their own right. The session was a tense one; the elders were not accustomed to being observed in action, and they insisted that Hicks's companions should leave; the others quietly but adamantly refused. Finally the elders got up and left, with one muttering angrily that "the ministers are answerable to the elders." Hicks then remarked to those who stayed that "it was time for friends to assert their rights, and not suffer themselves to be imposed upon" by oppressive church authorities. The others agreed vigorously. From this meeting, according to historians, can be dated the emergence of the "Hicksite" faction in Philadelphia as a self-conscious reforming party, which ended up as a separate Yearly Meeting after the bitter separation five years later.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

Family Matters #1

"Mother, has thee cut all four of thy wisdom teeth?"

"Yes, son, in a way: After all, in the same year I served on nominating, overseers and finance committees, and married thy father."

Family Matters #2

"Thee ought to be ashamed of thyself," a Quaker father said to his indolent son, "When George Washington was thy age, he had become a surveyor and was hard at work."

"And when he was thy age," the son retorted, "he was President of the United States."
