

PYM Religious Ed Notes

An E-letter from the Pacific Yearly Meeting Religious Education for Children Committee

#2, August 2006: Religious Ed in the Small Meeting

The Natural History of Children's Religious Education in the Small Meeting

Most of the meetings in Pacific Yearly Meeting are “small” by this yardstick: they are not large enough to produce consistent class-sized groups of children. The inevitable result is that First Day School efforts are not steady. Meetings move through phases: an enthusiastic “boom” phase, with eager young families on the religious education committee; a period of flagging energy—burned out committee members and children dropping out (often around age 10-12); an “empty nest” period. The most typical scenario in a PYM meeting is a small number of children, of uneven ages and divergent interests, attending irregularly. If we want to have adult meetings of a size we are comfortable with—that work for us—this is the nature of the First Day Schools we will most always have.

Fortunately, First Day School is not the only method—not even necessarily the most effective method—for sharing our faith with our children. Small meetings have significant strengths in the spiritual nurture of young people. To become a Quaker requires taking part in Quaker community—shared worship, nourishing relationships, stories, service projects. Small meetings can do all of these things well, in ways that are tailored to the needs of individual children. For example, Ruth Hultman arrived at San Fernando Valley Meeting as a preteen. There were small children in the meeting, but no others her age. Lois Bailey immediately recruited her to be on the Hospitality Committee. Ruth's story, as she tells it, reflects her childhood pleasure at being included in the work of the meeting. .

The monthly meeting's work with its children and teens is supported by the wider Quaker community: yearly meeting, quarterly meeting, youth camps at Ben Lomond and Sierra Friends Center, AFSC service projects. These wider Quaker community events are vital to teens and preteens, who thrive in the community of their peers. Many teens develop a deep appreciation for the process of meeting for business in this peer context. The small meeting can enrich itself by supporting these programs: transporting teens, offering scholarships, encouraging individuals to contribute time and energy to the programs.

What does your meeting do to include children in the meeting community? Let the committee know, so that we can share your experiences with others. Send email to quaker-re@yahoogroups.com.

Resource Corner

FGC Bookstore: Religious Ed For all Ages

An interesting resource for developing a religious education program that speaks to children and adults alike is Mary Snyder's *Quakers I and II: An Experiential Curriculum For People Ages Four Through Adult*. According to the bookstore, “This curriculum includes the basics of Quakerism through story. It is especially good for those new to Quakerism. Less than 15 minutes of preparation time is required since the lessons are based on story and a response to story.” Go to the FGC Bookstore for this and many other resources: www.quakerbooks.org, or phone 1-800-966-4556 for a catalog.

Consult with the PYM Children's Religious Education Committee

The members of the PYM Children's Ed Committee are happy to consult with you about concerns, issues, problems, and resource needs, including curriculum recommendations. Send an email to us at our committee listserve, quaker-re@yahoogroups.com. Or call a committee member: Gail Eastwood (Humboldt) and Sherri Sisson (Orange Grove) are co-clerks.

Napa-Sonoma Meeting: A Case History

Editor's note: when I visited Napa-Sonoma Meeting a few years ago, this smallest PYM meeting had a program with four teens and one five-year old present most Sundays. I asked the meeting members how they managed to keep their teens active when so many larger meetings had no teen presence. They all said, "We make them come." I asked two of the teens about this a year or so later, and one of them said, "They were kidding." The other said, "No, no, they were serious!" Napa-Sonoma, now in empty nest phase, has boxes of resources stored (and some easy at hand) in case some children walk in the door. PYM Children's Committee member Joe Wilcox remembers their program:

Napa-Sonoma is a very small monthly meeting [a total of 6 actual members listed in the 2005 directory!-ed], with no current attenders under the age of 18 (or 50). We seem to have done a respectable job of religious education with a group of children whose ages now range from 19 to 27. While none of these young people currently attends a meeting on a regular basis, all but one will tell you that they are Quakers, or were raised as Quakers, if asked to describe their religious orientation.

Our approach to First Day School was not terribly unique, except perhaps in its consistency. As with most meetings, the parents bore the brunt of the lesson planning and follow-through, though there was occasional help from other adults. We always had something ready for the kids to do, and worked hard to create a balance between bookwork and creative and/or physical activity. We used curricula from FGC, FUM and Philadelphia YM. We freely adapted any children's books that seemed suitable, and used lots of singing, acting, and writing and performing plays together. Some adults wanted more playlike activities, and some favored a more serious, scholarly approach. Happily, the kids, when young, rarely noticed the disagreements. As teens, they frequently created their own lessons, with adult consultation when requested. We also incorporated a lengthy unit on comparative religion, and visited a number of local churches, synagogues, etc. We taught the Bible as we taught other religious texts, feeling keenly that our children should have some familiarity with the tradition that has dominated the culture (not to mention the history) of the religion into which they were born. As the children grew, we wove service projects into the lessons: we had many cleanup days at local parks and schools, and cooked a meal for the local family shelter roughly once a month.

In many ways, I believe our small size worked to our advantage. When people signed up to teach FDS, it was considered a commitment of some importance, since others were doing their share of the meeting duties. More than that, many of us actually started attending in part because we wanted some kind of unpolluted religious education for our kids; like so much in life, it became a matter of getting out of the experience what you put into it. Our smallness made it easy to "catch up" any child who had missed a lesson; I think it also made it harder for parents to miss a meeting, knowing someone had worked to prepare the day's lesson for their child. In fact, there were many occasions when the lesson became one child and one adult. A "big" lesson consisted of six children; two or three was the norm.

My daughter, now 27, appeared on a local teen-moderated radio show when she was in middle school. The concept was something like "unusual religions." My daughter seemed to enjoy the chance to talk about her religion, and the "weirdness" of Quakerism actually bore some fruit, socially. My point is that some children may find Quaker practice interesting, simply because it is out of their everyday experience.

In every way we could devise, our meeting sought to include the children in the life of the meeting as a whole. They conducted their own business meetings, raised their own money for donations, took part in retreats and discussions whenever possible, and let us know when they thought we were being too patronizing, too goofy, or just too much.

Sign onto our email list: If you would like to receive this e-newsletter, please send us email at quaker-re@yahoogroups.com. The newsletter is posted at www.pacificyearlymeeting.org; go there to check out our April issue, "Listening to the Questions," if you did not receive it; or to print copies for others.