

Children's Religious Ed Notes

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

#5: Summer 2008: Youth Membership

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Editor's note: In this special (longer and we hope not too long) edition of our email newsletter, the committee reports on our survey of the monthly meetings children and teen programs. During the course of this survey, we were awed and impressed by the creativity, the thoughtfulness, and above all the devotion of those who work with our children. We need the children! One respondent sums it up: "When the children come in to meeting for worship, it's like the sun just came out!" We hope you'll be inspired to talk and correspond with us about the concerns and the successes of your meeting's work with young people. To subscribe to this email newsletter, or to contact the committee, send correspondence to eastwood@sohum.net, or contact any committee member.

In the Wings: PYM Youth Coordinator!

The Religious Ed Committee is delighted to report that at this year's annual session, PYM recorded a groundbreaking minute brought by Ministry and Oversight supporting "in principle" the hiring of a youth coordinator. A subcommittee of M&O with participation of young people was appointed to detail a job description and budget. The subcommittee will contact monthly meetings to help in the planning process. Both JYM and Young Friends submitted minutes in support of the youth coordinator, and were enthusiastic about the prospect of paid staff to help them with their programs. They had a taste of this position this year, as Alyssa Nelson developed on a very short timeframe a pre-PYM program for older teens and college age Friends, and worked on logistics for this year's JYM gathering with the JYM committee.

You'll find details of the discussion and planning to date in the minutes of the annual session, which will be posted on the yearly meeting website, www.pacificyearlymeeting.org.

Membership at Any Age: Building the Beloved Community

When and how do we invite our young people into full participation in the meeting community? When and how do we invite them into membership? Our *Faith and Practice* says that "a child of any age" becomes a member through the same application process as adults. It recognizes the tenderness and special considerations that meetings should practice in regard to membership applications from youth. In actual practice, few meetings entertain membership applications from young people, and few children and teens are aware that there is a process whereby they may apply for membership. In fact, in many meetings children stop attending around the age of 11 or 12, just at the age when the great Western mystics were having their first groundshaking mystical experiences, and the age when many cultures and religions offer a "coming of age" experience—confirmation, celebration, initiation. What are we losing?

The PYM Religious Education for Children Committee, opened a conversation about membership for youth at an interest group at PYM 2008, and we hope this conversation will be carried to the monthly meetings. What experiences can we share about youth membership, and what reflections can we offer? Some years back, Zac Moon challenged PYM plenary, "You never shared your faith with us!" Fostering participation in the meeting community is an important

aspect of sharing our faith. How are we doing this? Can we do a good job of this without also recognizing membership when—at whatever age—it has come into being?

Resource Corner: *Earthcare for Children: A First Day School Curriculum*

As we begin to recognize the threats of global climate change, we discover a need to provide our children with an education that we may never have received. We need to grow and to help them grow in awareness of the interconnection of our lives with the web of life on earth, and in taking responsibility for the effects of our actions on this precious web of life. Sandy Farley, Diana Egley and Tom Farley have developed, field tested and published a lively curriculum on earthcare that is appealing, easy to use, and Quaker-centered. Find it at FGC's online bookstore, at www.quakerbooks.org, along with many other resources.

What's Happening in the Meetings? 2008 Religious Education Survey Results

Is your meeting a small meeting, with a small number of children of diverse ages who attend irregularly? If so, you're not alone! Most PYM meetings fit this profile and face these challenges in building and maintaining a religious education program for children. Looked at from a different angle, most meetings enjoy the same opportunities to learn to know children's individual gifts, and to have programs that speak to those individual children who are under their care.

In the 2008 survey of meetings, members of the Religious Education for Children Committee interviewed or corresponded with people from meetings in Southern California, Northern California and Hawaii. We found that most meetings have a program for children. Most of these programs are small, under 10 children attending. A large number are very small, with an average attendance of 1-4 children. In its humblest form the program for children may take the form of a resource box (stories, crafts, activity ideas) and volunteers willing to take on any child who shows up. Only a handful of meetings have a regular program for teens. A significant minority of meetings report no children or teens active in meeting and no children's or teen program. Often, such a meeting will report itself to be an "empty nest"—they used to have children, and now those children are grown up and gone.

Challenges and Concerns:

1. Outreach: Given that the situation of small program—or no program—is the norm, it is not surprising that people in the meetings are concerned with attracting and retaining families with children. (A large meeting, on the other hand, expresses the difficulty of connecting with new families, making sure their needs are being met, that they feel included). So far we have not uncovered any good outreach models in the meetings.
2. Staffing: Frequently, meetings of all sizes also report difficulty in recruiting people to work with the children and keeping those they have from burning out. In some programs, children's program committee members and staff feel unsupported by the meeting, as though the spiritual guidance of the children were the concern of the parents and teachers only rather than the responsibility of the whole meeting that our *Faith and Practice* describes.
3. Attendance: People often cite irregular attendance as a problem in their program. How can meetings encourage and support consistent attendance—or learn to "roll with the punches" when consistent attendance isn't possible (as in the frequent situation of separated and divorced parents).
4. Teens: "When they hit 12 we lose them." "We don't have critical mass for the teens." How can a meeting, especially a small meeting stay engaged with its teens?

5. Other issues: Other concerns expressed to us included a need for more “user friendly” curricula, ones that inexperienced members could understand and use, a need for a Quaker-centered social justice curriculum, and a need for guidelines in child abuse prevention

Community: the Meeting in the Program and the Program in the Meeting

One of the interviewers sums up what he heard in this way: While so many meetings struggle with the same difficulties, a single common thread runs through the interviews with those people who express enthusiasm and a feeling of success in their efforts with the meeting’s children—building community. The program can be large or small, but in the robust program you will usually see “the meeting in the children’s program and the children’s program in the meeting.”

Meetings build community in many different and creative ways. Among many other practices, meetings reported to the committee:

- Meeting retreats with fun activities for all ages. In one retreat, children learned storytelling and told a story to the adults.
- “Fifth Sunday” special activities for the whole community; may include a theme or “religious education” element aimed at all ages, as well as singing and cooperative games, and, in some cases, family worship (part programmed and part unprogrammed, with singing, storytelling and unprogrammed worship).
- Service projects. In one meeting, the children’s and teen’s program brought a service project to the larger meeting; another program’s children’s meeting for business is working on choosing a service project to bring to meeting.
- Some meetings include young people on committees, including library committee and religious education committee.
- Christmas parties and other special celebrations particular to individual meetings.
- Children create plays to share with the adults.
- In one meeting, older adults were invited one at a time to tell about their childhoods. A big hit with the children, who enjoyed and remembered these stories!

Successes and Solutions

Many programs have four adult leaders, each one in charge of one week of the month, so that the children are experiencing four “strands.” Generally, meetings using this system like it. Children get to know a rich assortment of adults, none of the adults need miss meeting for worship all the time, and burnout is reduced. The weak side of this system may be a lack of connection between the strands, and a lack of consistency week to week.

Many meetings use one or more of the curricula offered in the Friends General Conference catalog (www.quakerbooks.org). Pre-developed curriculum materials are often mixed or alternated with plans developed by the adults leading the program. Not all meetings use curriculum plans; a “lesson” may be based on a story; or a discussion theme may emerge from asking the children, “How did your week go?” Almost all meetings leave the contents of the program to the committee and staff (following the lead of *Faith and Practice*, which offers no guidelines about the content of Quaker religious education).

How Meetings Work With Teens

Few meetings have regular teen involvement, but not all meetings with involved teens are large. Some programs are planned by the teens themselves, who have been learning these skills through participation in quarterly meeting and yearly meeting teen gatherings. A few interesting models:

- Live Oak Preparative Meeting, a small meeting that meets only twice monthly, offers religious education for all ages before meeting for worship. Teens participate in the adult education program; one teen is on the planning committee. “They keep us from getting sedentary,” comments one adult. The teens encourage more active programs, including service projects.
- Palo Alto meeting, a large meeting, built a program around a core of young people who had become close through attending Ben Lomond Quaker Camp together. This year they offered their first regional gathering, inviting young people from neighboring meetings. A meeting with a small number of young people could look at neighboring meetings and help their teens to organize occasional teen events that would pull from this larger pool. Many teens already are engaged in building deep relationship and learning Quaker practice together in camp and quarterly and yearly meetings.
- Service projects have been popular with teens; it is more deeply exciting and engaging to them to be putting testimonies into practice than to be talking about them.
- A few meetings have received applications for membership from young people. Young applicants go through the same membership process as adult applicants, according to the *PYM Faith and Practice* section, “Children and Membership.” One member who served on the membership committee of a 12-year old applicant (now a member) commented on how much this young person has affected the meeting.

We hope to share more ideas and practices gleaned from the meetings in the future.

Storytelling Workshop: Help Us Get the Word Out!

Karen Olson’s *Telling From the Heart: Storytelling as a Way of Spiritual Nurture*
Ben Lomond Quaker Center, Oct 24-26.

Quaker Center says about this workshop, “During this weekend Karen Olson will guide us as we each strive to become storytellers. We will learn how to choose a story that touches our heart, how to learn that story “by heart” and how to tell it to others’ hearts. The workshop will include methods and places for finding stories that inspire you, techniques for learning a story and tools to make that story interesting to others. Everyone will learn a story and share it with others during the workshop. Quaker biographical stories will be shared from Karen’s “Quakers Just Like Us” collection. Finally, we will explore how to use storytelling in First Day School, family gatherings and one to one.

Recommended for ages 15-99. Stories speak to all ages—we start telling stories when we start to speak!

Looking for resources? Have a concern you’d like to discuss? Have ideas or experiences you’d like to share? Want to subscribe? Email the newsletter editor, eastwood@sohum.net. The PYM Religious Education for Children Committee will respond to your concerns. Find past editions of this newsletter at www.pacificyearlymeeting.org.