

Walker Creek Ranch, Marin County, California

Plenary VI, Seventh Month, 30, 2009

## Children's Religious Ed Notes

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

**#7: Summer 2009**

### Sharing Our Faith: The Light Under the Bushel Basket?

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*"I wish the Quakers would advertise, like the Unitarians do," suggested one respondent to our telephone survey—"Why can't we do billboards and ads?" One of the two most common laments we heard in the course of this year's survey of the monthly meetings was some variant of this: "We don't have enough children for a program". "We need more young families." "We're an aging meeting, and when families check us out they don't stay." Do we want this young energy enough to reach out to it? If we wanted to reach out to families who might be in need of our great treasure, how would we do it? What about reaching out to our own young people, who may not attend meeting for worship?"*

#### Stories and Other Best Practices: Join Us at PYM!

At PYM's annual gathering at Walker Creek the last week in July, you can have fun with Sandy Farley and Lucya Van Diepen at the Religious Education interest group, **Building a Lesson From a Story**. Learn how to have fun with the children of your meeting using activities you've developed to bring to life the lesson of a story you've read or told. (Sandy can be invited to bring this mini-workshop to any meeting that wants to organize a group of Friends and others to attend.)

Also at Walker Creek, we invite you to join Religious Education Committee members in an open committee meeting. We'll talk about "best practices" in religious education for young people that we've learned about from the meetings in our survey, from lesson planning to service projects and beyond. And we want to learn what's working for you in your meeting, what your concerns are, and how this committee can help you in your work with the young people of your meeting.

#### Outreach in the Monthly Meeting and Worship Group

Some PYM meetings have thriving children's programs. Such meetings tend to be energized by the young energy in their midst. But many of our survey respondents from PYM meetings are aware of needing more families and children. Some may even be aware that there must be families and children out there who need what a Friends meeting has to offer. Are we called take any action to reach out to seekers? If new families and children came, do we have the resources to serve them? Overall, only 80% of the monthly meetings surveyed this year have children's programs of any size. *Of the respondents from 35 meetings, only 20 (57%) described a program that typically had more than two children in attendance—enough to think of as a group.* Most of the 20% of meetings with not even one child are empty nest meetings, whose members may remember with fondness, "We used to have a children's program." There is a natural cycle in a small meeting of clumps of children moving through, growing up and moving on, but we don't seem to have yet mastered what it takes to set a new turning of that wheel in motion.

We don't have good demographic information here, but it's easy to suspect that if we could look at the overall profile of Pacific Yearly Meeting, we'd see a picture of an aging congregation not replenishing itself. We'd see our overcommitted group of baby boomers (our baby elders, aspiring to the stature of our elder elders) moving toward retirement age, with children grown and gone. Some meetings are on the path to extinction; others may be looking at the possible opportunities of increased available baby boomer energy in the early years of retirement.

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Of course, there are meetings where the children's programs are flourishing, with an admirable balance of energy from the grandparent and parent generations. Some involve teens and college age Friends in the care of the children. The annual gathering offers an opportunity for children and young folks from all over to congregate. One has only to look around this gathering to feel the vibrant presence of children, of teens, of Young Friends, a contrast to the experience of many monthly meetings. The continued energy and vitality of JYM and Young Friends at the PYM gathering is a testament to the programs (mostly outside the monthly meetings) that have worked with young people over the past decades. How different would the annual Meeting for Memorials feel without all these vibrant young people joining us in worship!

Although committee members heard the lament of not enough children or families numerous times in our interviews with religious educators in various meetings, we did not hear of any models of outreach to families. (Some meetings are on the whole comfortable with being a gathering of adults, and have no deep intention to include children in their midst, while other meetings would genuinely like to see a succession of younger people in their midst.) How would a family (or any other seeker) know anything about what Quakers have to offer, or even that we exist at all?

**Quaker Quest—a Modern Outreach Model:** Friends with a serious interest in connecting with those seekers who might find in the Friends meeting a haven of spiritual nurture for themselves and their families might look at the Quaker Quest model of public presentations and discussions of Quaker belief and practice. While not every meeting has the resources to undertake the full Quaker Quest enterprise, it is still worth looking at some of the principles of outreach embedded in the model.

1. Choose topics that speak to the seekers' condition. A meeting wanting to speak to the needs of young families, for example, might center a presentation on teaching and practicing nonviolence with children living in a violent world—the peace testimony in daily life.
2. Presenters speak briefly, simply, and from their own experience and hearts about the topic. Hearing from several presenters allows listeners to appreciate the diversity of the meeting. While most of us may not be very practiced in speaking about how we experience and live our faith, perhaps we need to learn to do so.
3. Advertise the meetings widely. (There may be targeted ways to find parents who would resonate to the Quaker path, different for every community.)
4. Provide an opportunity for seekers to speak from their experience and hearts. Listen to the needs and responses of those who attend.
5. Include meeting for worship—at least a taste of our central practice.

**Outreach/Inreach to Our Own Youth:** Can we help preteens, teens and Young Friends to stay connected with their meeting communities? Can we find a way to share our faith with them from our hearts? Can we recognize their gifts and honor those gifts in the work of the meeting? Could it be that some of the fresh young energy we need is hidden in front of us in plain sight?

**Resources:** You can find out more about Quaker Quest by googling it online. Start with the Friends Journal article at [www.friendsjournal.org/quaker-quest](http://www.friendsjournal.org/quaker-quest), which includes links to the British and FGC Quaker Quest sites. For more outreach and inreach ideas and resources, check out the work of the FGC Advancement and Outreach Committee at [www.fgcquaker.org/ao](http://www.fgcquaker.org/ao).

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