

October 15, 2006

Dear Friends,

I've just finished reading through your evaluations of our 2006 Gathering at Redlands. Many of you indicated that while there was some confusion over what the invitation from Ministry and Oversight meant by a year of discernment, you found that being asked by M&O about "what is essential" led you to a deep and profound place during gathering. That was also my experience, and being asked by you to be Presiding Clerk of PYM humbles me. It is an especially humbling task given what is happening in the world today. Especially since Quakers have often been at the forefront, leading the way with peace through justice. We know that all of us working together can help Spirit bring changes to a world that desperately needs to change course away from violence, war and torture.

This is possible for our faith community because we know that our activism must be grounded in our spirituality and because we have always agreed that before going out to change the world we must first change ourselves. We have sought out the roots of violence in ourselves so that we might learn how to be non-violent. We have tried to ferret out our own racism before going out into the world to confront racism. Because we believe in continuing revelation, we have no altars, no images, and no rituals that we abide in, believing our only abode is in the Spirit and the search for truth. Our single guide has been, "this I know experimentally." Each of us are seekers after truth.

So Ministry and Oversight asked us to look deeply at our structures and lives as Friends. Many folks feel we should be doing that all the time! Of course that's true, but we are human and often feel comfortable in the way things have always been done. Ministry and Oversight asked us to step back and take a deeper look at ourselves because there have been troubling signs in our community. Ministry and Oversight noticed over the last three or four years that many of our committees have not been functioning as they should and Nominating Committee has told us it is harder and harder to find people called to serve. I have found this to be true not only for our PYM committees, but also in local Meetings. If our committee structure were wiped clean, would we find ourselves longing for a particular committee? Would we find ourselves wanting our committees to do the same jobs? Is the work of each committee essential?

Eric Moon, our Brinton Visitor, brought another troubling sign to us. He came back from his visits and said to us at Yearly Meeting gathering a few years ago that he found Friends overloaded, stressed out, and burdened. Were we being Spirit led, or just committee driven? Many folks on their PYM evaluations this year said something that we've seen on almost every evaluation of PYM for the last four years. There was no room, it seemed, for Spirit to come through in the plenaries. Our plenaries are often over-long with a few folks speaking to every topic in each plenary and some folks never speaking at all.

When we've tried to tackle difficult issues knowing that our truth is often found in the thorns and brambles, we have seemed reluctant to deal with the issues. Yet we know that we learn real "Quaker Process" only when the difficult things are said and way opens to a deep unity because we have respect and trust with each other and our community of faith. Twice now Young Friends have met in the week before Yearly Meeting to tackle difficult issues and to hold each other accountable for living their faith. Have they found such accountability lacking in their Yearly Meeting gathering? Why does our gathering seem to some to be fragmented into three Yearly Meetings (JYM, YF and PYM)?

This Yearly Meeting gathered while there were some serious problems in the world. Lebanon was in flames. Darfur was a black spot on the world's compassion. Yet

in our plenaries we did not step up to address these issues as Friends. In a world in chaos, can we afford to not address these issues? What issues are we called to address? Are there ways our structure or timidity are preventing Spirit from moving us out into the world in an activism grounded in Spirit?

As your new Presiding Clerk, I also have heard other concerns. What does it mean for us to be a faith community? How can we be more welcoming and inclusive? How can we go out into the world and truly know that our faith community stands with us? The Presiding Clerk should “remain flexible and responsive to the wide spectrum of feelings, thoughts, and styles present in the Yearly Meeting” (Faith and Practice p. 173). I have the responsibility with your help to set an agenda that reflects our diversity as a faith community. You should understand that I am an activist at heart, but that I know my activism needs to be grounded in a deep and reverential prayer life. Many of us are doing important and difficult work in the world. One Friend said at gathering this year that our Monthly Meeting is like our brothers and sisters, while our Quarterly Meetings are like our cousins and aunts and uncles. Our Yearly Meeting then is our extended family.

The power of having a community of faith is in taking our extended family and our faith with us, and at the same time enlarging our sense of family. When I was preparing to go to the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, my son didn’t want me to go. He was fearful. I said to him that whatever happened I would know he was thinking about me, but more importantly he would think about those who were around me. I explained that there is no real safety in the world if anyone around us is not safe. While safety is an illusion, community and faith are not.

Because we have lots of important work to do at our annual gathering, I would like to see us do more work at Representative Committee in March to free us up to take on the important work of seeking what Spirit requires of us at annual gathering. This year Palo Alto has agreed to host us. If you’re a PYM representative, PYM officer, or PYM committee clerk, start making plans now for the first weekend in March. One change I’d like to see is to have committees and organizations begin to discuss interest groups so that they can be reviewed by Representative Committee, which means you’ll need to begin planning them sooner. I will also ask folks at Representative Committee to help me plan the agenda for gathering, so representatives ought to come prepared to bring concerns about the agenda from their Monthly Meetings. Much of what comes to plenary could well be approved at RepCom and should not take up the time they take at our annual gathering; that is, if we trust our committees to do their work.

Our Ministry and Oversight calls us to be a faith community. They have offered to help us do the deeper kind of discernment called from us in these difficult times. They have put together some suggested readings and thoughts and have offered to act as liaisons to any Meeting or committee that wishes that help. You and your Meeting are, of course, free to not accept their invitation. It was an invitation to step back for a brief time from your usual work and to go deeper than you have gone as a committee or Meeting and share what you find, for this we know experimentally.

With thoughts of community and service,

Joe Franko