

May 18, 2013

Teen Program Adult Committee Epistle to College Park Quarterly Meeting

Dear College Park Friends,

A few years ago, the adults of the Teen Program Committee began a practice of meeting in person about two months prior to the upcoming quarterly meeting for full day of worship, worship sharing, visioning, and program planning. To our knowledge, the adults of the committee did not meet separately from the teens in the past. We made the decision to try doing so, although at first some of us wondered if it would be seen as exclusionary or adultist, or if it would detract from the goal of a youth-centered program. On the contrary, we have found that our adult gatherings allow us to create a needed community spirit among us, allowing us to come better prepared when we meet jointly with the teen leaders to support them to create their program. We have heard of times in the past when much of the work of this committee seemed to fall on one person; now it is much more shared. We have also increased the number of Friendly Adult Presences at each gathering, wanting both to give more support to FAPs in their work with the teens, as well as to offer opportunities for more adults to experience the joys of our teen program.

Alyssa Nelson has joined us for the majority of these meetings, adding the unique perspective from her role as our PYM Youth Program Coordinator. She has been supporting us in our ongoing growth to be allies to young people as an advocate for calling teens into leadership roles they are ready to own. In addition, Alyssa created a Teen Program Planning Spreadsheet, as a Google Document, that has become the backbone of the teens' planning process. It has fostered more effective autonomy among the teen clerks as they take turns clerking an average of two planning conference calls prior to each quarterly meeting. Alyssa has also led and co-led a number of intergenerational activities at our Quarterly Meetings, encouraging Friends of different generations to form relationships and engage in meaningful dialogue together.

Having face to face meetings three times per year offers opportunities for us adults to worship together with our hearts and minds open to how to best support the emerging adults of our Friends' community. Together, we have taken a look back at our own experiences transitioning into adulthood and into our hopes for the future of the Religious Society of Friends with queries such as:

- How is this work a faithful practice for you?
- What do our teens need and how can we work to address those needs during quarterly meetings?
- How Quaker should the teen program be?
- What aims do we have for our teens and for the teen program?

The themes that emerged from our worship-sharing included breaking down barriers to form a diverse, vibrant community, succession planning, mentoring, “being the adult” with teens, and sharing our faith. Inadvertently, our responses led to the articulation of a deeper mission and vision for our teen program.

The spiritual life of the teens and their connection to Quakerism are enhanced by a strong teen program. It can work, and nurture them, or leave them floundering. The importance of structure, in balance with empowerment and trust, is critical.

We hold strong feelings about the importance of being grounded in the history of our Friends community, knowing the language, and developing the discipline. We are encouraged to be formal, to engage in real dialogue with teens, and to value the concept of mentorship. We recognize the power of truth felt and spoken out of individual experience, and seek ways to draw teens into that deepening activity.

We made note of the fact that our teen community is constantly in a state of transition, not only due to the rapid personal development intrinsic to adolescence, but also due to the fact that teens are always aging in to, and out of, this age group. Acknowledging this reality led to conversations about mentoring and succession planning, which we decided to address by offering an adult committee member as a mentor to each teen in a program leadership role during quarterly meetings. We also discussed how we might teach Quaker faith and practice to our young people, who often do not have an active teen program to attend at their monthly meetings. We decided to plan a Teen Clerks Gathering the night before winter quarterly as part of our mentoring work. We considered the following queries in preparation...

- How can we nurture the understanding of Quaker faith and practices within the teen community, which is together just a few times per year?
- How does one learn servant leadership

Our sharing laid the foundation for more detailed planning of a Teen Clerks’ Gathering. We decided to invite the teen clerks from our Quarterly Meeting as well as those from Southern California Quarterly and Pacific Yearly Meetings, in part to ensure that we had a critical mass of teens present, but also because these young people are in leadership roles that cross-pollinate amidst these institutions. Our gathering of six teens and five adults offered the opportunity, to teens and adults alike, to share the struggles of: holding Quaker values in non-Quaker settings, responding to queries, and sharing frustrations and successes while clerking.

The Clerks’ Gathering was well-received by the teens, who requested separate leadership workshops like this more often. Two of the teens present offered the following reflections on our gathering:

“It was really important because teens often get nominated to clerking positions with hardly any idea of what we’re expected to do. It feels great to have adults with a lot of experience who are willing to be there and help us out, especially having people who can answer our questions!”

“It was really nice to get ideas flowing again within the year. Often between JYM and Rep Com, a lot of motivation is lost, but it was great to have a reminder of what we as leadership want to get out of our time together, and what we want other participants to get. Additionally, building connections with adults, and strengthening them within the teen leaders, is really important to making a great team and accomplishing all that we need to accomplish.”

Based on what our teen clerks shared in January, we realized that they are longing for more understanding of, and the reasons behind, our Quaker practices, and how they can convey the importance of it all to the less-experienced teens in the community. We looked at our Quaker forms and how they serve us when we are willing to discipline ourselves in adhering to them. We decided to incorporate these ideas into the community expectations discussion during the first teen session of every quarterly meeting, exploring the deeper meaning of our testimony of community. Our forms and practices are part of what creates our identity as Friends. Our teens desire to learn these and to be a part of a community that takes our forms and practices seriously. For them, as well as for us all in the adult community, the Quarterly gathering is an opportunity to practice these “counter-cultural” ways of being in community. Our work with teens has reminded us that we are all challenged to discard certain mainstream ways of interacting and embrace our gatherings as opportunities to live into our truer selves, in whatever stage of life we find ourselves.

Yours in service,

Kathy Runyan, Jim Anderson, Sue Torrey, Stephen Matchett, and Dorothy Henderson
Adult members of the CPQM Teen Program Committee