

Unity with Nature Committee Report to Annual Session 2019

Questions abound:

Discernment of the mission and future of the PYM Unity with Nature committee

Examination of the present state and purpose of PYM UwN began last year and is expected to continue until we have clarity --- or at least the beginnings of clarity – on the many questions that have arisen in the process of discernment. Our status review revealed gaps in basic Quaker committee practices like clerking, inclusivity and communication, as well as institutional memory, perspective and unifying sense of mission.

The central question seems simple enough. Committees exist to perform work that PYM has decided needs to be done.

What do we want the Unity with Nature Committee to do?

Rather, since wants are many, *What absolutely needs to be done?*

The corollary question is also simple: *Who will do this work?*

This is not the first time the central question has been asked. The following is from a report to UwN's monthly meeting liaisons in 2006:

"In his Announcement of Representative Committee, 2006, Jim Anderson, clerk of PYM, advised us to: '...enter in 2006-2007 a "jubilee" year, a time to "deepen our spiritual foundations, to reconsider our structure."' ...

"At the PYM evening plenary session on Tuesday, August 1, [UwN clerk] Kristina Perry presented the Unity with Nature Committee as an example of re-examining the work to be done by a committee and whether the structure as it exists is adequate to the task. If it is not, then a sabbatical is in order: stop what you are doing and think about what you need to do. While Kristina proposed that if no real use for the committee remains, it should be laid down, she made it clear that Quakers will continue to seek actions to mitigate the harm modern civilization does to the Earth. The Yearly Meeting agreed, approving a 5-member committee (plus 4 vacancies), with new member Joe Morris acting as convenor ..."

The charter of the UwN Committee has since its founding in 1985 (Minute 85-17) allowed latitude in the Committee's work based on leadings of its members:

"We recommend that part of the charge of this committee be ... to define its own specific tasks and develop its charge as way opens ..."

However, the leeway to "define its own specific tasks" was secondary to a primary mandate:

"The care and preservation of the environment, which sustains all life (including all future generations of plants, animals and humankind), is a religious concern. ... We, the Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, intend to pursue our leading on this question, of which Marshall Massey has so forcefully reminded us. We say to him as we say to ourselves, 'Go forth into the world, lecturing, teaching, writing, publishing, and walking humbly with God.'"

With the creation of *EarthLight Magazine*, the UwN Committee chose to concentrate on the "publishing" component of its primary charge. *BeFriending Creation* continues as a publication of

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Quaker Earthcare Witness aimed toward a Friendly audience, while the ecumenical *EarthLight Magazine* is no more.

In consequence of the ending of its primary charge comes the third of the many questions:

What guidance does the Yearly Meeting offer for finding a new primary mission?

The first of two UwN interest groups at this PYM Annual Session explored the historical charge given to the Committee. From this, attenders generated a list of possible tasks and directions for future work (appended).

The second group was intended to place PYM's UwN Committee in the context of other religious-based environmental organizations, including Quaker Earthcare Witness, equivalent bodies in other religious denominations, and interfaith collaborations. Attenders of this group prioritized the list of actions from the first group according to their sense of need and benefit to PYM. They were also asked to volunteer to serve on a temporary working group to continue working on clarifying the mission of UwN.

Among the broader questions that the second group only started to address are:

To what extent should UwN confine its work to Quakers and Quaker-led action compared to joining with non-Friends who share our concern for care for Creation?

Is there a role for Friends in the global search for sustainable living that stems from our unique beliefs and practices?

Among the many questions for further deliberation are:

Are the mandates of UwN and Peace and Social Order Committees so similar that they should merge? Clearly, there are overlapping roles: promoting environmental justice and aiding refugees escaping ecological collapse, among others.

Has the climate crisis progressed to the point that UwN should take on relief work after fires and floods in the PYM geographic region?

How can UwN restore or create new collaborations with younger generations, with interfaith allies, with indigenous people who relate to Nature differently from the European model.

Does the crisis of climate change seem so urgent than the voices of those who envision a less-reactive and more experiential role for UwN are unheard?¹

¹ A reviewer of this report asked for clarification of this question, which was added as a response to the second interest group, filled with statements about how Quakers should react to the climate crisis. Reactive decision-making could lead to the Committee basing its decisions only on numbers (e.g.: the action that yields the greatest CO2 reduction). While this is a valid decision-making criterion, it is not necessarily the conclusion of Friends' decision process.

"Experiential" is intended to point to a mission for UwN that might not directly address environmental remediation, but rather provide Friends with experience that they would not otherwise have. An example is the inter-racial summer camps that Josephine Duveneck began at Hidden Villa in the 1940s, when urban children had their first experience of sleeping overnight in a forest. Or witnessing first hand

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All of these questions and more remain after the close of this Annual Session. Two first steps toward a revived UwN Committee are being considered: (1) sending a survey to every PYM Annual Session attendee and Monthly Meeting, asking that these questions be considered –ideally, in an attitude of worship, so that the greater common good rises over one’s personal preferences – and (2) convening an in-person workshop at Sierra Friends Center in the next few months to winnow the many suggestions and begin to converge – again, in worship – on a new mission for Unity with Nature.²

In conclusion, it is worth noting that all PYM committees – indeed, all Friends’ work – teach and practice right living and right relationship. But all the other committees confine their teaching and practice to the realm of human relations. Only Unity with Nature teaches and works for right relationship to the non-human members of our family of life on Earth.

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Anyone moved to comment, critique, or contribute to our continued discernment should contact Eric Sabelman at eesabelman@gmail.com to be added to the circle of communications on this matter.

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July 20, 2019

(and working for restoration of) the sites of climate disaster (wildfires being a close-to-home example) and hearing those whose lives have been changed by it. Or sitting in worship and hearing the inner voice speak to us until our direction is clear.

² The word “mission” as used in this report represents the reason the Unity with Nature Committee exists, separate (at least at this time) from projects it undertakes. Writing mission statements has been rightly criticized as futile - we have lots of well-written testimonies and minutes going back to the start of the UwN movement, so one more would have little impact. Maybe “criterion” is a better word, describing how we will decide what action to take and how we will measure its success or failure.

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UNITY WITH NATURE – FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

SCORE on
7/15/2019

- 1 Plenary ... invite speaking from the floor on witness, action, challenge
 - ___ Diagram relationships: spirit, action, communication
 - ___ Promote ecological integrity in natural and disturbed systems
 - 1 Balance between abstract goals and work on the ground
 - 2 Practice salvage ecology (rescue threatened survivors)
 - 10 Reforestation/restoration – be Johnny Appleseed - Afforestation and non-arboreal restoration (meadow, coast, desert)
 - ___ Urban and neighborhood sustainability
 - 1 Environmental justice – people’s suffering matters
 - 13 Collaborate with indigenous people who understand nature differently; restore indigenous lands
 - 7 Participate in local projects, both religious & secular
 - ___ Support people [activists, thinkers] who understand small things
 - 2 Merge/overlap with P&SO [merge only if no way forward to an independent UWN Committee]
 - ___ Encourage spiritual connections with Nature
 - ___ Be a bridge between science and activists
 - ___ Promote moral commitment within secular activism
 - 5 Take up/publicize “issue of the month”. Or one focus each year.
 - 20 Leverage our energy for maximum effect; Work with other effective organizations
 - 4 Create communications network with/for support of Monthly Meetings
 - 10 Lobby Congress (with FNCL) and local/regional government
 - 5 Support candidates for office
 - 10 Support youth action
 - 6 Fall in love with Nature. Worship in Nature [variation in practice for each Meeting]
 - 11 Get rid of (recycle) fossil fuel vehicles
 - 3 Reduce meat consumption
 - 2 Change our individual behavior
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