



SOUTHEASTERN YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS
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Southeastern Yearly Meeting Epistle, 04/16/2006

To Friends Worldwide,

We greet you, as 168 members of Southeastern Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends are ending the 44th annual Gathering, held at the Florida United Methodist Life Enrichment Center in Leesburg, Florida. The theme of our Gathering has been “Here I Am, Lord.”

The spiritual enrichment of our days started in early morning worship on benches at the lakefront, where egrets and herons flew along the water, and songbirds sang from the oak trees, draped with Spanish moss.

Worship sharing deepened our awareness, and prepared us for Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business. The agenda was crowded with the necessary work of the Yearly Meeting.

Our shared joys included the opportunity to reconnect with old and new F/friends and acquaintances. Our twenty-eight children provided much joy, and we note our enjoyment of the intergenerational dance and music. We also enjoyed gathering around the piano after dinner, singing our theme song, “Here I Am, Lord.”

The pain of our Gathering must also be acknowledged. We had an excruciating session attempting to discern our path to deal with Friends United Meeting’s personnel policy, which excludes Friends from staff and volunteer positions on the grounds of marital status, sexual orientation, and activity. It was difficult to move forward in love to all parties, and many-experienced intense pain. Minutes expressing our yearly meeting’s unity will be widely distributed.

Our difficulties were mitigated by the hopeful messages carried by our Walton lecturers, Vince and Ernie Buscemi. Their intermingled voices told of two lives of constant prayer and service, led into effective action in anti-racism work in Quaker meetings, in U.N. work on women’s rights with and AIDS, and other projects. Other hopeful messages were brought to the Gathering by an AFSC project encouraging sale of fair-trade olive oil produced in Palestine, and the string of haircuts - called Worship Shearing - produced by the new Pro Nica project that is teaching haircutting to impoverished Nicaraguan girls and women.

We have been blessed to share our joy and pain in this beloved community.

Epistle from World Gathering of Young Friends 2005
As Presented at SEYM Yearly Gathering Business Sessions, Second Plenary

By Jessamyn Doan and Devender Braly-Sellers

“I am the vine, you are the branches”
...Now what fruit shall we bear?

(From John 15)

To all Friends everywhere,

Greetings from the World Gathering of Young Friends 2005. 226 Friends gathered together in Lancaster University, United Kingdom, from 16th – 24th August 2005. Our theme was ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Now, what fruit shall we bear?’ taken from John 15; and William Penn’s challenge ‘Let us then try what love will do’. Among us, 58 Yearly Meetings and 9 monthly meetings and regional groups were represented, with speakers of more than twenty different languages. We were called to be gathered together at the place where our Quaker movement first bore fruit, the heart of 1652 country. We returned to our shared roots, to the birthplace of our collective spiritual identities. Through climbing Pendle Hill as a community, to live out George Fox’s vision of a great people gathered together, we found a unity with the place and one another, among the bright green hills, surrounded by grazing sheep.

We felt great joy in being together and many Friends gave thanks for being here. However, our hearts were filled with sadness too. In the hall where we met there were many empty chairs, and we were always aware of those Friends who could not join us here in Lancaster. Many were absent because they were denied visas, others because they found when the time came that they could not join us after all. Their loss is our loss as well, for without their presence we could not feel their truth reflected in their words, their experiences, their faces and their smiles. However we could feel their presence in our hearts. We have selected 2 representatives from each region to go to a post-WGYF gathering in Kenya to share with these brothers and sisters the Love and Spirit that we felt in this gathering.

Twenty years have passed since the last World Gathering of Young Friends, held in Greensboro, North Carolina, USA. To what purpose were we summoned once more? Here we tried each other’s forms of worship, silent and programmed, songs in many different languages, scriptural readings, hand holding. We were open, amazed, stretched and blessed. We learned that the great presence in our lives can be called by many names, Jesus, Christ, God, Inner light, Spirit, Love or many others. Ultimately, through listening to the Spirit that moved us, not the words in which we expressed our movement, we strived to become one organism, one body made up of many different parts (1 Corinthians 12:13). We were united not so much in the expression of our faith as in our common desire to be unified and by the power of the Spirit amongst us during these 9 days. We were challenged to put aside the labels we hide behind, programmed, unprogrammed, liberal, evangelical, and come together as Friends of the Truth, seeking together for the common truth behind our language. We have not finished this process.

We are only at the beginning of a long path, but the love and joy we have felt in being in this place together have allowed us to come this far, and we pray that they will lead us further yet.

The time here has been a chance to reflect on our lives. We have been challenged to recognize ourselves as God’s children, and respond in willing devotion. The love we have found here is not for us to own but to share. We desire to show our love by doing good and avoiding harm to all people and to all the Earth. We must let others see this love and know its source so that they may come to share it.

The Spirit present in our gathering summoned us to be a gathered people, and spoke through the many different people and cultures here to remind us of its glory, power and purpose. The Spirit is

at work in all of us, and it is calling us not to judge one another's forms of worship but to examine our own hearts, find our own calling. We are called to take what we have experienced here and give it back to our communities.

Far away meetings now have faces, stories and friendships that make them real to us. Bridges have been built at our Gathering, which we call on Friends everywhere to nurture and support.

We will keep this contact alive through exchanges, more frequent gatherings and opportunities to work together. Through this contact we will give strength to each other and share our gifts. We must face the future challenges of the Religious Society of Friends together.

Where we explored the theme of the vine and the branches we found that its fruits are born from love. We have experienced what Love can do in this Gathering; now let us try what it can do in the world.

—WGYF Epistle

The Poet's Epistle: An "Epistling" Rhyme By Daniel Doan
On behalf of SEYM Junior Yearly Meeting,
Teen Friends' Epistle Committee, 2006

This year throughout the course of SEYM,
We learned about past Quakers and strove to be like them.

We viewed a great film called Friendly Persuasion,
Which demonstrated how to deal with temptation.

We talked of famous Quakers with the help of Dan Vaughn,
Recent people who many others relied upon.

We talked with Nancy Howell about the Kalahari Bushmen,
Discovering these primitive people who for themselves fend.

We explored controversial topics at the Teen fish bowl,
From views on homosexuals to integrity of the soul.

Again, Dan Vaughn helped us run our business meeting,
Finding a consensus proved to be a goal quite fleeting.

During the evening we attended the Intergenerational Dance,
This fun event required coordination of feet and hands.

Each day we took our places in groups of worship sharing,
These small doses of quiet were relief from noises blurring.

We separated into groups to find out what to do next,
Did you here any clue Quakers invented Root Beer?

We put together kits to give to those who have no home,
With care and love, of course, and shaving gel and combs.

On the evening of Saturday we enjoyed the Walton Lecture,
With interesting ideas, we had to draw up new conjectures.

Another great Yearly meeting weekend had past,
We cannot wait for next year, when we'll return at last.

Junior Yearly Meeting Business Meeting #2

JYM has approved the theme of "Peaceful Activism" for next year, with subtopics of nonviolence and assertiveness training, and a possible media interlude called "Quakers Behind the Scenes".

The Clerks approved for next year are Daniel Doan, Jessica Begin, and Allan Schmalstig. The recording clerk will be Amy Carlie.

We approved the epistles.

JYM is in unity with the broader SEYM Community in the concern with FUM's discriminatory hiring policy. We felt that regardless of affiliation, communication should be increased with FUM to share our measure of truth in witnessing equality. We believe that some action should be taken to meet in person with members at FUM to reach an understanding and put a human face on the issue.

Wee Friends Epistle

SEYM 2006

Hello Friends,

My name is Connie Guenther from Jacksonville Meeting and I along with my co-leader Marie Marcinkowski from Space Coast Meeting worked with the Wee Friends this year. I have to start by saying these children are truly wonderful and are a joy to be with. We have experience being a part of this Quaker Community through stories, songs, play and a visit from our Quaker Storyteller Cathy Gaskill.

Wee Friends explored the process of making friends and being a F/friend. Marie and I witnessed these 4 children, none of whom had met before, become close friends. They have shown tenderness and caring for one another and each one is a treasure.

We also explored this year's theme of "Here I Am Lord" by expressing ourselves through Art, Music, and Dance. We have all seen how unique and special each of us is, just the way God made us.

One of our favorite projects was making a "Me" poster. We traced each child on a large sheet of paper and they went to work creating their own image on paper. I want to share this work with you now.

(JYM Friends hold up "Me" posters with Wee Friends hiding behind.)

Children come out from hiding one at a time:

"My name is Cole, I like my bear"

"My name is Matt, I like my #83"

"My name is Addie, my favorite part is my flip-flops"

Each Wee friend also has an instrument with them.

Matt: "Mine is a guitar, I can play the chicken dance"

Matt had his very first guitar lesson from Cathy Gaskill during our session. (Matt plays 'The Chicken Dance.)

Cole: "Mine is a recorder."

Addie: "Mine is a recorder."

Cole and Addie have a song to play, let's see if anyone recognizes it. (They play *Hot Cross Buns*.)

Marie and I want to thank you Friends for this opportunity to work with the Wee Friends. We especially thank the volunteers who helped us. Your time and care are much appreciated. We want to leave you with the last line in a favorite book we read:

"We all can dance, when we find music that we love"

From *Giraffes Can't Dance* by Giles Andreae

06YM06 Southeastern Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) recognizes our 350 years Peace Testimony and conscientious objection to war. We agree with the Declaration by our religious society to English King Charles II “that the sprit of Christ, which leads us to all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons.”

As such, we support the peaceful use of our tax dollars and oppose military spending. The Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund (currently HR 2631) would allow conscientious objectors, as defined by the Military Service Act, to register with the U.S. Treasury Department. Conscientious objectors could thereby pay all of their federal tax liability for nonmilitary spending. Congress would spend those monies on anything nonmilitary. We therefore urge our Congressional representatives to co-sponsor HR 2631. We ask individuals, monthly meetings, the preparative meeting, and worship groups to consider how they can work for this longstanding Quaker concern.

Individuals are encouraged to broadly publish this minute.

06YM07 Miami Friends Meeting is engaged with local workers in aid of their struggle for “Jobs with Justice.” This struggle is for Jobs that provide a living wage, true health benefits, safe conditions of labor, and the right to determine if they wish union representation and how they may express that preference.

SEYM asks Friends to inform themselves and take action in concert with Miami Friends to enlarge community support of the workers, to make that support evident, and to hold all those involved in prayer.

06YM12 Southeastern Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends recognizes the endorsement of the Friends Committee on National Legislation’s Sensible Transition to an Enduring Peace (STEP) is but one action SEYM Friends can take as we continue to carry our witness against the U.S. war in Iraq.

We are in unity on calling for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. We encourage all SEYM Peace and Social Concerns committees to seek leadings and opportunities for carrying this testimony forward. Peace and Social Concerns brought forward Palm Beach’s concern with an amended minute to which Friends approved.

06YM13 In response to the recent occurrences of National Security Agency and Department of Defense spying on Quaker meetings, groups, and individuals, Southeastern Yearly Meeting urges all Friends to oppose this illegal government activity. Southeastern Yearly Meeting unites with Palm Beach Monthly Meeting in their concern:

That, we are being spied upon because of our religious convictions which include advocating nonviolent solutions to conflict. The Religious Society of Friends has believed in and practiced nonviolence since our beginnings in the 17th century. Friends’ Peace Testimony is based upon the sacredness of each individual and the unity of all; there is that of God in all people.

Our country’s strength is founded upon the right to freedom of speech, religion, and peaceable assembly. Government spying upon peace activists

and invasion of a church are illegal, including during times of war. Friends participated in the founding of this nation. When we gather peacefully to act upon our beliefs according to our consciences, and in doing so disagree with our government’s actions, we are protected under the Constitution of the United States of America.

Freedom of religion is the primary reason that Friends and other groups emigrated to this country. In this spirit, we cannot and will not in right conscience surrender our religious beliefs. Practicing nonviolence requires great courage as we continue to speak our truth.

We hold our nation in the Light during these difficult times.

06YM14 Southeastern Yearly Meeting (SEYM) offers this minute of graveconcern, reflective of our struggle with the issue our affiliation with Friends United Meeting.

We are united in our strong opposition to the policy contained in FUM minute 88GB-52; on the grounds it violates the Quaker testimony of Equality. [See Attachment to YM Minutes UM General Board Minute 88 GB 52] This FUM policy causes profound pain in our members and to our community.

As an affirmation of who we are, the Marriage and commitment section of our Faith and Practice defines marriage as a union between a couple before God, and deliberately does not define what constitutes a couple in terms of gender.

Our experience in SEYM has been that spiritual gifts are distributed by how Friends are called and their faithfulness to that call, not by marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

At this time, we find we are not in unity to disaffiliate with FUM. We are also not in unity to remain affiliated with FUM.

We encourage Friends in SEYM and FUM to maintain and expand Friendly communications as they are led. We urge the FUM Board to reopen the discernment regarding personnel policy minute 88GB-52. Our process of discernment with regard to SEYM's relationship to Friends United Meeting is ongoing. We will revisit this at our next Yearly Meeting.

06YM15 SEYM will send minute 06YM14 to the clerk of FUM, the general secretary of the FUM, all yearly meetings, worldwide, and monthly meetings in North and Central America.

06YM25 SEYM approves the following letter to be mailed with our restricted donation check to the Indiana Office of FUM:

To Friends United Meeting General Board and General Secretary:

Southeastern Yearly Meeting (SEYM), in view of our Minute 06YM-14 sent to you separately, is sending our normal Yearly Meeting annual payment (\$1200) for Friends United Meeting (FUM) restricted to directly support the hospital in Kaimosi, Kenya, instead of to the General Fund of FUM. This action is intended to support the concerns and missions of FUM without supporting the General Board's personnel policy #88 GB-52, which we strongly oppose.

Attachment: FUM General Board Minute 88 GB 52:

(a) We affirm the civil rights of all people to secular employment, housing, education and health care without regard to their sexual orientation. In particular, we condemn violence, whether verbal or physical, against homosexuals, and call for their full protection under the civil rights laws.

(b) We reaffirm our traditional testimonies of peace, simplicity, truth speaking, gender and racial equality, personal integrity, fidelity, chastity and community. We recognize that there is diversity among us on issues of sexuality. For the purpose of our corporate life together, we affirm our traditional testimony that sexual intercourse should be confined to the bonds of marriage, which we understand to be between one man and one woman.

(c) The lifestyle of volunteers under appointment to Quaker Volunteer Witness, regardless of their sexual orientation, should be in accordance with these testimonies.

According to the same minute, the General Board also approved adding the following statement:

These policies are based on Friends beliefs as interpreted by Friends United Meeting since its beginning.

In March 1991, the General Board Executive Committee approved (91 GBEX 18) circulation of an "Organizational and Personnel Policy Manual." It took the QVW policy and extended it as follows:

Friends United Meeting holds to the traditional Friends testimonies of peace (nonviolence), simplicity, truth speaking, community, gender and racial equality, chastity, and fidelity in marriage. It is expected that the lifestyle of all staff and volunteer appointees of Friends United Meeting will be in accordance with these testimonies. Friends United Meeting affirms the civil rights of all people. Staff and volunteer appointments are made without regard to sexual orientation. It is expected that sexual intercourse should be confined to marriage, understood to be between one man and one woman.

The 1988 minute placed the personnel policy within the framework of traditional Friends testimonies and said that the policy applied to the corporate activities of FUM. The wording of the 1991 Personnel Manual explicitly applied the policy to all staff and volunteer appointees of FUM