

## **General Secretary's Report Fall Sessions, 2006**

I need to start this report talking about what your staff has gone through in the past six months. At the beginning of June we packed up and moved into a space one quarter the size of what we normally work in, to accommodate the remodeling of Friends Seminary space above, below and on one side of our space. The two and one half to three month prediction for how long we would not have access to our space dragged on to over five months. During that time, we had days without power, days without email, and days without phone service. Once we finally got back into our space, we struggled to unpack [which we had been promised would be done for us] while simultaneously dealing with work long overdue due to the chaotic conditions we had been struggling with. To date, we have still not finished unpacking and settling into our space. It has been an unimaginably stressful and difficult time for us.

During this time, some work had to be deferred. A few things fell through the cracks. Given the working conditions that we have been struggling with, it is astonishing that it has been only a few. If yours was one of those pieces, we apologize, and ask for your forbearance.

When you get a chance, please thank your staff for carrying on in unimaginably difficult circumstances. They deserve your gratitude and support.

The construction will resume for two weeks or more around the Christmas holidays. It is not clear at this time if we be able to keep the office open during that time. We ask for your prayers and support as we continue to serve you under very trying conditions.

The Yearly Meeting as a whole is continuing to move in the right direction. We are doing the things we need to be doing, and they are bearing good fruit. We are growing in depth, commitment, faithfulness and numbers.

- **We are tending to the nurture of our youth.**

We have created a youth task group; the numbers of youth attending Representative Meetings is growing by leaps and bounds; Long Island Quarter's youth program is up and running; Friends in Nine Partners Quarter are interested in starting a similar group; there is more integration between our youth and adults at our annual sessions; Friends General Conference's Young Quakes program will be held within NYYM next year; and our adult young Friends have reached out to youth ready to leave the JYM program and enter into the Circle of Young Friends.

- **We are starting to better support our young adult Friends.**

53 Adult Young Friends [CYF's] attended Silver Bay this year, a number unprecedented in recent history; CYF organized a conference at Powell House for young adults; a throng of over three hundred graduates of PoHo youth programs, their spouses and children met at PoHo for a reunion this summer; we continue to work on

an internship program for young adults; and planning is underway for a conference on starting a young adults group in your meeting or region.

- **We are nurturing individual Friends.**

The Drawing Out Gifts Series continues to enliven and support Friends in their spiritual lives; Friends from All Friends Regional and Shrewsbury –Plainfield Half Yearly Meetings are collaborating on creating a spiritual renewal group for their regions; more and more Friends are coming forward with leadings to travel in the ministry; Ministry and Counsel Coordinating Committee is looking at how best to provide spiritual nurture at a yearly meeting level; MCCC has also seen clear to institute a yearly meeting prayer list.

- **We are becoming more visible.**

Old Chatham MM put up a billboard ad decrying our nation's abuse of prisoners from a faith basis and made themselves better known in the process. A regional newspaper carried the story. Poughkeepsie MM is working on a similar venture, linking the ad to their web page. New Brunswick MM has been doing such effective advancement work at Rutgers that they no longer have enough chairs for worship, and is getting more. Friends have provided a presence at a variety of community festivals, events and marches. This has resulted in requests for articles about Friends, renewed connections with people once connected with Friends, and increased our visibility in the various communities. Buffalo MM is working on an ad for their area which might serve their meeting, Orchard Park, and Collins MM. NYYM's Advancement Committee is hosting a consultation at Powell House next March, "Living Our Faith Out Loud," inviting Friends from around the YM who are already engaged in advancement and spiritual renewal work to come together for collaboration and support.

- **We are better supporting our constituent monthly meetings.**

Our General Secretary and Administrative Secretary continue to visit monthly meetings and worship groups, providing support, counsel, a listening ear, resources, and help with conflict. We are also leading retreats and workshops for local and regional meetings. The Transition Working Group is laboring with how to best structure the functions of ministry and nurture at a yearly meeting level so as to better support the life of the Spirit in our local communities. The Conflict Transformation Committee is being called on more and more to help meetings in distress, sometimes in conjunction with the General Secretary or Traveling Friends familiar with those meetings. We are looking for ways of further expanding the Traveling Friends program. Topics in Spark have been chosen to nurture the life of monthly meetings, and we continue to get feedback that they have been helpful.

- **We are deepening in our witness to the world.**

Purchase Quarter is considering a minute on the need for parole reform. Our representatives to the New York State Council of Churches are also working on this issue. Our public witness against paying for war continues, with the School of the Americas Watch organization linking to the minute on our website affirming the religious basis to our conscientious objection to military taxation. There will be a conference in February at PoHo exploring possibilities for corporate legal action on war tax issues. We are continuing and expanding our support of Friends in Africa. Significantly more men who have been involved in our Prison WGs and AVP programs are staying with Friends upon their release than previously. Perry City Friends have prepared a career resource guide as a counter-recruitment effort. Our amicus brief supporting Dan Jenkins in his resistance to war taxation is in process, and we recently signed on as Friends of the Court in an important challenge to the death penalty. Friends are organizing new worship groups at Fishkill and Five Points prisons. And many Friends have gotten behind the Quaker Initiative to End Torture.

- **We continue to grow in membership.**

For the second straight year, we have grown slightly in membership. In the September Spark alone, there were thirty –six new members listed. And while I believe that we still need to do a better job of befriending the newcomers who come to us, we are doing a better job at inreach.

So there is an awful lot of good that I can point to at this time, and much to celebrate. And there are areas where we still have significant work to do. Friends, we need to become more skillful at laboring in love with one another. We need to learn how to speak our truth in such a way that it can be heard, and we need to learn to hear another's truth with our hearts open, without defensiveness or anger.

I have been learning a lot lately about what this means, to labor in love with each other. My most profound lessons have come from experiences representing NYYM with the General Board of FUM, as we worked together on a common identity that would hold us all, as part of a strategic planning process. By far the most challenging part of this work was laboring on the sexual ethics portion of the FUM Personnel Policy. That was one of the most profound experiences of Friends process that I have ever had. It has deepened my sense of what our practice is capable of, if well used. It has changed what I bring to my visitation. Indeed, it has changed my life.

I want to quote from a letter from your FUM representatives which recounts that time:

We have been humbled to learn that to labor with others in the hope of imposing our view on them feels like an assault to them, rather than love. We have learned that to labor in love means to let go of all sense of “us and them” and to understand that the moment we depart from a sense of the laboring body as “us,” and move to viewing anyone as “other,” we close our hearts in judgment and we have ceased to labor in love. We have learned that to labor in love means to listen

deeply, to seek to understand, to refrain from judgment, to speak our truth without agenda, to know and celebrate each person in the room as a Divine spark of God, to not let our hearts cloud over with anger or recrimination, to genuinely love those we vehemently disagree with, even in the moment when our disagreement is at its peak—that is to labor in love, and we have been brought to it, and we are praying that we will continue in it, and we have come away changed in our souls because of the experience.

You might wonder why I feel that this is so important for our yearly meeting at this time.

One quarter of the monthly meetings and worship groups that I have visited to date are struggling with unresolved conflict in a way that is sapping the lifeblood of their communities. I am not talking about normal conflict which is a part of any community's life, which is worked through and over with. I am talking about intransigent conflict which lingers, like a very unwelcome guest, for year after year, without change or resolution, becoming too much the focus of the community's time, energy and attention. This form of conflict has been robbing too many of our communities of energy which could be better put into caring for each other, doing outreach in the community, or public witness. Instead of building up the Peaceable Kingdom, we are struggling with each other in ways that are painful and debilitating.

I am not saying that we need to be nicer to each other. In a way, our being nice to each other, as opposed to speaking hard truths to each other, has been part of the problem.

Meetings and worship groups I have visited have been embarrassed to have an outsider witness the distress they are in. As Friends, we aspire to be peacemakers, and it is difficult to acknowledge conflict that we cannot seem to find a way out of. It is my hope that when meetings living with long-term conflict hear that they are not at all unique—that one quarter of our meetings share their condition, that they may find some comfort in this knowledge.

And unproductive conflict is not just binding up our worshipping communities. This is also happening in some of our committees and in the larger Yearly Meeting. This is us.

The single most limiting factor in our growth is this conflict which eats away at our energy and potential. It is not lack of vision that is limiting the life of our monthly meetings. It is not for lack of gifted Friends, it is not for lack of seekers, it is not for lack of faithfulness. It is not for the lack of our having a message, or even for lack of money that we are not growing as rapidly as we might. It is conflict poorly addressed and unresolved which takes up too much of our vitality.

Such conflict can entrap us, transfix us, grip us, demanding all our attention and energy. Good Friends with good hearts talk about the conflict which is crippling their meeting or committee almost as an alien being—they don't know how it arrived, and don't know what to do with it as it settles in and becomes too much of the focus of their meeting or committee.

This conflict is not just an alien being, an unwelcome guest with inexplicable ways. It has some structural components. As I have listened for what I need to share in this report to the YM body, for weeks I have felt pieces of a message about conflict rising

in me. Those pieces relate to these structural components. As I have held the experiences gained in so many communities struggling with intransigent conflict, I am clear to name some common elements.

**Most often, the conflict constellates in the business process.** Frequently it has originated or been exacerbated by an incomplete understanding of our process of laboring together in the Spirit. I feel that as a larger body, we are doing a good job of addressing the clerking side of improving our skills at Meeting for Worship for Business. We have had Arthur Larrabee come to give his workshop three times in the past two years. Linda Chidsey has had training sessions for clerks, as has our new clerk, Ernie Buscemi. The Transition Working Group has put significant effort into the clerking section of the handbook.

We need to also learn how to more faithfully serve as the body of Friends in our business process. We understand that our clerks put themselves under holy obedience to serve the body in their role as clerk. But I find that we do not have a similar understanding about our role as a member of the body—that this, too, requires voluntarily assuming holy obedience to the Divine, and a surrender of ourselves to the corporate process. It is this incomplete understanding of what constitutes effective participation as a part of the body, rather than lack of good clerking, which most frequently contributes to the ineffectiveness of our laboring together. We need to better distinguish where our urge to contribute comes from, especially in the more subtle shades of motivation.

We all recognize when our movement to speak comes from love and a deep center. And we also can easily recognize when it comes from anger, personal attachment, or a combative response. But it is that middle ground between the two poles of that continuum, where it is less clear what seeds we are sowing for the whole group to deal with, where we need to become more aware.

I have been learning a lot about this lately, and the lessons are deeply humbling. I have learned that when I am experiencing even the slightest threads of judgment, when I first start to see another Friend as an opponent, as a “them” and not part of the “we” that includes me, when the first seeds of self-righteous indignation begin to well up, then I am moving in the direction which leads us to what I refer to as “Quaker trench warfare” in our business process. At those times, I need to have the wisdom and the discipline to be silent.

**Another structural component that I have witnessed is our choosing to not respect the authority of the individuals or committees we have *authorized*, literally “given authority to” to discern how to best handle the difficulties of our community life.** Too often we undermine the work of these Friends entrusted with the care of our communities.

Friends have powerfully ambiguous feelings about authority. On some level, we all recognize the need for it; and on another, many of us are acutely uncomfortable with any Friend actually exercising it. This robs us of a structure that can limit conflict before it starts, and effectively address it once it is present. If we reject our structures of authority that we ourselves have agreed upon, how are we to sort through our conflicts?

**Yet another structural component is our very human tendency to regard an individual or a few individuals as “a problem” or “*The Problem*.”** This is a convenient framework of understanding which isolates the conflict in an individual,

instead of recognizing it as an aspect of community functioning. Experience teaches us that this facile approach is rarely accurate or ultimately helpful.

**Finally, I have witnessed, in both monthly meetings and committees, a deep embarrassment over letting Friends outside the group know that we are living with conflict.** We want to work through the difficulty before letting others witness our condition. In working with conflict, outside help is often the best way forward, so this mindset robs us of one of our most useful tools.

Some of the communities I have visited have struggled terribly with knowing how to care for and live with individuals who carry a lot of hurt, and habitually spread that hurt around the community. They have tried to use all their best understandings of our practice, and still have not found a way for the community to function in balance and harmony, and have asked me for help. I have felt woefully inadequate to provide counsel in such situations. This is a problem throughout Friends, which I have talked about with Friends from across the country. We are on the low end of the learning curve in this, are experimenting, and sharing the results of our effort with each other.

There are no easy answers here. I do not pretend to have any. Holding it in prayer, I feel that I do have the beginnings of some scant clarity to offer:

1. Refrain from making the person or persons into a “them” or defining them as “a problem.”
2. Keep your heart open, free of judgment, fear, anger, or defensiveness, no matter how well provoked.
3. Realize that you have the choice whether or not to pick up and recycle the hurt that any individuals are spreading.
4. Keep the needs of the community in mind when addressing the needs of the individual.
5. If you cannot do the first four, then immediately ask for outside help.

The conflict that is part of any community can mire us down if we let it. We need instead to become comfortable with conflict, skillful in addressing it, and capable in dealing with it while still “keeping our eyes on the prize” of creating the world we are led to co-create with God.

We need to become more skillful at the work of being the body in our business practice. We need to recognize when we are gripped by conflict, and choose not to speak from that place; we need to have love be the first motion. We need to learn to ask for help.

We are already making significant progress in this area. More communities are asking for help from the Conflict Transformation Committee, Traveling Friends, and YM staff. We are trying new ways of thinking about the conflict in our communities, and experimenting with different ways of handling it. This is a good start, and, in truth, we are just beginning this work.

We are called as a body to be a people of peace. This effort of learning how to labor in love with each other is the workshop where we are honing our skills, developing our abilities to be a force for peace in the world. It is not a mistake that we are facing the most challenging aspect of our collective life at the very time that we are living into

questions of how God is calling us as. They are part of the same work. Let us enter into it with enthusiasm, as it is the work that God has set before us, and God will be with us in it.

As Oliver Wendell Holmes said; “What lies behind us, and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” It is time to bring forth what lies within us, with all our energy and resources. The time is now, the work is before us, let us be faithful.