

Living out the Blessed Community

Report of the General Secretary

Summer Sessions 2016

Our theme this year is *Nurturing the Blessed Community at Every Age*. There are various ways you can understand the words, Blessed Community. For some of us, they may mean merely being in the blessing of a wonderful group of people whom do a pretty good job of getting along, and feeling the goodness of connection to others. In my understanding, these words connote that, but also a deeper reality which is preexistent, since before time was, which we can intermittently touch or tap into. Other names for this reality in our tradition have been, and are, the Kingdom of God, the Reign of Love and Justice, the Commonwealth of God, and the Beloved Community. It is a reality that I not only believe in, but one which I “know experimentally,” and one which I feel we are called to live into, and live out, here and now, in our lifetimes. That is core Quaker theology, both the knowing of the reality of the Beloved Community, the Kingdom, and also the call to live it out, here, now.

We all fail miserably at this from time to time. I certainly do, all too often. I can, and do screw up, sometimes in major ways. And my many failures remind me of just how much I have to learn, just how far from living in that reality I am. But those failures don’t erase my experience of what it feels like to touch that spiritual reality. Those tastes of the Beloved Community draw me on, despite my failures and brokenness. The blessing and the power of that condition continues to call with a powerful voice, drawing me, and us, I hope, into deeper and more frequent experiences of that Ultimate Reality, palpable just beyond the edge of our daily existence.

I also know, experimentally, that that state has great power, power to give life, power to heal, power to transform our society, and our world. It is nothing less than this that we are called to do, as Friends.

One way in which we actively and actually live out the Kingdom, Gospel Order, is to be accountable to each other, to let our yea be yea and our nay be nay. We as a community made a commitment two years ago to live into priorities gleaned from the body of this yearly meeting through listening to every monthly meeting and most worship groups in the yearly meeting. How are we doing at that? It’s still a little early to tell, but I have a story to tell which may give you a sense of our progress to date.

In June, I spent eight days in Cuba as your representative to the FUM Board, for meetings there. This was the first time the FUM board had ever met in Cuba

Yearly Meeting, and this was a very, very big deal for the Cubans. What they needed from us was for us to visit each and every Friends Church in Oriente Province, eleven out of the twelve in the whole yearly meeting, to share our love and support equally, among all of them. So we spent a great deal of time on a bus, travelling to meetings. As we traveled from meeting to meeting, my seatmate one day, from Baltimore Yearly Meeting, asked me what was going on in my yearly meeting. I told her, that much like BYM, we had done an extensive listening project, going to all the monthly meetings and asking them where the Life was in their meeting, and how the rest of the yearly meeting could better support that Life. I told her that we as a yearly meeting had united in a set of priorities based on that listening, and were now trying to fulfill that vision.

She asked me what the monthly meetings were asking for, and what the yearly meeting was doing in response to that. As I started to name some of those things, I realized that, hey, we have actually done quite a bit. After a while, I asked her if I was giving her more information than she was interested in, and she said, no, not at all. So I went on naming a few more. Here is what I named:

- That our meetings were asking for help in spiritual nurture and that they wanted programming addressing that need to come to them, rather than for them to have to travel to get it. I shared how our Spiritual Nurture Working Group was bringing programs to monthly meetings in our *Tending the Garden* series.
- That our meetings were asking for us to do a better job of speaking out, of representing Friends views in the wider world, and how we had created a new website to better communicate who we are, and to make that website more accessible to non-Friends.
- That our meetings had asked for help in doing a better job of spiritually nurturing our children, and had lamented the small numbers of children, young adults, and young families. I shared how we had hired a Children and Youth Field Secretary, to address those specific needs, helping meetings to better weave younger Friends into the fabric of our communities.
- That our meetings had asked for better financial transparency, so that they could really understand where all the money went, and what ministry that was supporting, and how our Trustees in response had labored to create a comprehensive budget, combining our operating budget and the trust funds budget.
- That our meetings had asked for help with advancement and outreach, and how we were starting up the Outreach working group, a network of Friends passionate about Quaker outreach, creating a collaborative learning community, sharing best practices, encouragement, and experimentation. I also talked about our sponsoring the “From a Place of Abundance” workshops, designed to help meetings discover what gifts they have to offer, and how to share those gifts with the communities which surround them.

- That our meetings were asking for help with First Day Schools, both curriculum, and help in knowing how to teach our children, and how both the Youth Institutes and the work of our Children and Youth Field Secretary were addressing those needs.
- That our meetings needed the yearly meeting to serve as a connector for Friends carrying a concern for various social issues, and how the yearly meeting supported over 100 Friends in attending the White Privilege Conference.
- That our meetings wanted the yearly meeting to be accountable to the monthly meetings, and how we were setting up a working group to make sure that our yearly meeting committees follow through with our commitment to live out the priorities.

As you can see, this is quite a bit. One member of that working group, the Leadings and Priorities Support Working Group, found 26 instances named in our advance reports of how our committees and staff are addressing the work we agreed to two years ago. There is a lot going on. And as we expand programming, we are at a crucial point in this process. One Friend put it well, after hearing of our unity in adopting the Priorities. She wrote “Will we be willing to pay for what we pray for?” I trust that we will, but also that we will really need to step up to the plate in order to do so.

Matt Scanlon, who works with non-profits to help them better weather economic challenges and to have their budgets and their resources in alignment, described us as being in an important juncture, though one familiar to him, and one which would not be unexpected given where we are just now. We have expanded program so that our work better aligns with the needs of our community. This means an increase in budget and staff time, for which there will be a lag-time while the yearly meeting community begins to experience the benefits of this work. If we can maintain funding through this growth, we should be able to sustain the growing edges of our community.

There will be opportunities during the week to engage with our Development Committee on how each of us is led to be a part of this larger work, whether that be sharing our time, our talent, or our treasure. It is my hope that Friends will connect their excitement about the good work being done with these opportunities to engage with Friends who seek to support our growing edges. If our yea is to be yea and our nay, nay, then I trust that we will indeed do all we can to pay for what we have prayed for.

And speaking of those growing edges, it’s my pleasure to introduce our new Children and Youth Field Secretary, Melinda Wenner Bradley. Some of you got a chance to meet her and hear her introduction at Spring Sessions, but many of you here did not have that opportunity.

Words which describe Melinda include:

Quaker educator
Collaborator
Teacher of all ages
Leader
Coordinator
Mentor
Presenter
Speaker
Member

Her work is informed by a quote by Maria Montessori:

*Education is not so much teaching with love but participating,
as one teaches, in the energy of God, who is love.*

Melinda has spent most of her adult life teaching Quaker children, and teaching adults how to better teach Quaker children.

In her career as an educator and in service to religious education programs, she has worked with children and youth of all ages. Her work has been shaped by listening to children and by collaboration both with teaching colleagues and the families of her students. For her, teaching and working in service to Quaker religious education programs has always felt like a leading and a place where she is called to grow.

Her work has included growing sustainable models for children and youth programs, developing, identifying and sharing resources, and building networks to lift up the many gifts among Friends. She views spiritual formation of all ages as a ministry that our Religious Society can be more intentional in supporting.

Among her many accomplishments:

- Taught Godly Play and Faith & Play Curricula
- Created written materials for Playing in the Light and Learning in the Light trainings
- Supported grant-funded project for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Children's Religious Life program
- Taught children of all ages, in Quaker schools, in Quaker meetings, and at Gatherings of all types
- Presented as a Plenary Speaker, FWCC World Plenary, Pisac, Peru, 2016 and led workshops on "Playing in the Light: An Introduction to Godly Play and Faith & Play for Friends" and "Learning in the Light: Faith & Play for Friends School Educators"
- Served on the NYYM Youth Committee
- Been a member of the Religious Education Association (Professors, Practitioners, and Researchers in Religious Education)

We are very lucky to have her working with us. She will be available for one-on-one conversations all week, and for an opportunity to hear about the Monthly Meeting Partners Program in Gullen Lounge for Tuesday lunch.

As we go about our week, seeking to live more fully into the Beloved Community, this story from Rachel Naomi Remen may have something to offer us. It's called "Teachers Everywhere."

I can clearly remember something that happened when I was in third grade. I was walking with my mother on a downtown street in New York City, pushing through crowds on our way to I no longer remember where. I had just been put into a special class at school because I had done well on an IQ test and my new teacher had told us that being in her class meant that we were brighter than most of the people in the country. As we moved through the hurrying crowds, I remembered this and was filled with an eight-year-old's outrageous pride. I told my mother that my teacher said that I was smarter than most of the people around us. She stopped walking immediately and knelt down so that we were at eye level with each other. As the crowd flowed past us on either side, she told me that every one of the people around us had a secret wisdom; each of them knew something more about how to live, about being happy, about loving than I did.

I looked up at the people passing by. They were all adults. "Is this because they are all grown-ups, Mama?" I asked her, taken aback. "No, darling. It will always be that way," she told me. "It is how things are." I looked again at the crowd moving around us. Suddenly I wanted to know them all, to learn from them, to be friends.

This lesson became lost among the many others of my childhood, but shortly after I became a physician I had a dream that was so powerful that I remembered it even though I did not understand it. In this dream, I am standing in the threshold of a door. I seem to have been standing there a long time. People are passing through the door. I cannot see where they are going or where they have come from, but somehow this does not seem to matter. I meet them one at a time in the doorway. As they pass through they stop and look into my face for a moment and hand me something, each one something different. They say, "Here, here is something for you to keep." And then they go on. I feel enormously grateful.

Perhaps we are all standing in such a doorway. Some people pass through it on their way to the rest of their lives, lives that we may never know or see. Others pass through it to their deaths and the Unknown. Everyone leaves something behind. When I awoke from that dream, I had a sense of the value of every life.

(Remen, Rachel Naomi, My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging. (NY: Riverhead Books, 2000).

We have an opportunity this week. Each person here has a gift, a blessing to offer us. This gift may seem wrapped up in strange, unfamiliar, or even unpleasant wrapping paper. But each person here, of whatever age, has a gift to offer us, something that they know, that they can teach us. Each person here knows something about life, about the Divine, about the Beloved Community, that we don't know. I pray that each of us unwraps that gift, and receives that blessing, the blessing of what it means to live out the Beloved Community.