

**IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE)
2003 QUERIES AND SELECTED RESPONSES**

We have listened carefully and prayerfully to the first six sets of 12 queries and selected responses from our meetings, prepared by the assistant clerk. We will read other answers in session as way opens. All selected responses will be printed in the minutes. We found many answers inspiring and reflect on past queries and answers of other Yearly Meetings sessions. We truly value our tradition of having advices and queries to answer and their consideration during annual sessions.

1. MEETING FOR WORSHIP

Query: Are our Meetings for Worship held in a spirit of expectant waiting and communion with the Holy Spirit? How do we prepare our hearts and minds for worship?

How do we refer to that which is divine? How does ascribing gender to the Holy Spirit affect our worship?

How do we integrate our daily lives with Meeting for Worship? Do we seek opportunities for worship outside of meeting?

How does the vocal ministry of the meeting contribute to its spiritual life? In what ways do we recognize and nurture vocal ministry and other spiritual gifts?

Selected Response: A good portion of the discussion of this query centered around vocal ministry and the spirituality of the meeting.

One participant in the discussion felt that our meeting appears not to have a common, shared spirituality and that this may contribute to our difficulties in keeping young people in the meeting. Because vocal ministry tends not to come from a large variety of members, young people may not view the individual messages as messages from the meeting, but as messages from individuals.

Other participants expressed different viewpoints. One felt that our young people are here *because* of our spirituality. Another pointed out that one's view is dependent on the definition of "spiritual," and said that if a common belief is the basis of a common spirituality, then she felt that it was not necessarily desirable to have a common spirituality. She grew up in a meeting where there was a great deal of unity of belief, yet she was not entirely comfortable with all aspects of this belief. In thinking about the definition of spirituality, one participant expressed the view that spirituality is an aspect of what we share and how we care for each other. Another participant felt that it is not necessary to have a single definition of spirituality to have a collective sense of spirituality.

A number of participants expressed their personal experiences with spirituality. One expressed the difficulty during meeting for worship of letting go of one's own thoughts and letting the Spirit lead. Another talked about the ups and downs of life and the Spirit. There are times when a person clearly feels the presence of God and feels a sense of being led, but there are also times when a person feels utterly alone and adrift. One must be ready and open at any time for the presence of God to be felt. Sunday morning meeting for worship is in a sense the opportunity to practice readiness for communion with God. A third participant expressed her growth in spirituality through her struggle to find a deeper level of spiritual energy in an effort to try to help others in the meeting.

2. OUTREACH

Query: Do we encourage intervisitation within the Yearly Meeting and with other Friends?

What are we doing to share our faith with others outside our Friends' community? How do we speak truth as we know it and yet remain open to truth as understood by others?

In what ways do we cooperate with persons and groups with whom we share concerns? How do we reach out to those with whom we disagree?

How do we make the presence of our meeting known to the larger community? Do we invite others to share in our Meetings for Worship and other meeting activities? Do we welcome everyone and appreciate the gifts that differences such as race, creed, economic status, disability, age, gender or sexual orientation may bring to us?

Selected response: We respect and value the diversity of our membership. We appreciate the warm welcome we have received from the Meeting and try to extend this to newcomers, but we are reluctant to speak openly about our personal beliefs. It is a challenge to take advantage of opportunities to share deeply held convictions with others, even within our fellowship.

Social justice is non-denominational. Many of us feel our values are not those of the society as a whole. The War on Terror and state budget cuts which have decimated programs for the disadvantaged are calling us to action. We seek ways of connecting with like-minded citizens regardless of religious affiliation.

Speaking our truth to hostile audiences, whether they are right-wing activists or family members with differing views is most difficult for us. We often "don't bother" since we doubt our ability to change minds. Here the counsel of those who have trained and experienced conflict resolution are most helpful. They reminded us the goal was not to evangelize the opposition by converting them to our truth but to simply state the truth as we saw it honestly and directly. Speaking truth has value even if it appears our message was not heard. We cannot know the long-term results of our actions.

We reach out to the community by making the Meeting House available to community groups. Our meeting is enriched by members' participation in FWCC, FGC and Iowa Yearly Meeting. We enjoy Thanksgiving fellowship with First Friends, and young friends from across the Yearly Meeting have gathered at a friend's rural farm house for weekend retreats.

3. MEETING FOR BUSINESS

Query: How can we hold our Meetings for Business in the spirit of love, understanding and patient search for unity without becoming frustrated by differences of opinion or the pressures of time?

How do we respond when no one else in the meeting seems to hold the views that we do on an issue? How do we respond to a dissenting minority?

How do we share responsibilities among Friends in our meeting? How do we serve our meetings?

Selected response: We are fortunate in this meeting that we seem to share common views on important matters and therefore do not face the frustration of strong dissent. Probably the most often occurring point of contention is over when the lawn needs mowing or the buildings need cleaning mainly because of personal schedules. Working together on projects for the care of our facilities is, however, a service of joy for us as we share a common expectation that when something needs to be done, everyone will be involved.

We try to be open and listen to a dissenting opinion whenever it is expressed, but the challenge seems to be more how we respond after we have heard what another has said. We find that faith in and use of Quaker process helps keep the level of frustration at a minimum.

Most accept committee responsibilities willingly recognizing that as a small group everyone must share in the care and support of the meeting. Although we are cautioned to keep in mind an individual's strengths in appointments, we are aware of times when a person finds an opportunity to develop an unexpected ability or to grow into a responsibility when given a new appointment.

4. HARMONY WITHIN THE MEETING

Query: What can we do to deepen our relationships with one another? How does gender affect the way we relate to each other?

How does our meeting balance the needs for honesty and kindness? What topics do we avoid for the sake of "unity"?

When in conflict with others, do we cultivate a forgiving spirit? Do we look to that of God in ourselves and seek to address that of God in those with whom we disagree?

Selected response: We think we should have harmony, yet we often don't. Instead of expressing honest feelings of disagreement, it is easier to avoid touchy issues. Meeting should be a place where we can express differences and strong feelings with honesty. Dealing with conflict and differences can help deepen relationships. One member works to own her feelings of non-charity toward others. She knows that she can change her own feelings and reactions and not those of the other person. Many of us have been raised to be polite and not stir up conflict or mention differences. If we are honest, our honesty should be tempered with kindness. We must hold one another in tenderness and acknowledge others' feelings and opinions. It is much harder to listen to criticism from those who don't seem to care for us. Love and trust must be present in a relationship before honest disagreement can be successful.

Shared activities bring people closer. It is important for us to get together for social times such as potluck after meeting one Sunday a month, soup night, or an open house night with board games and food. We seem united in our wish to spend more time together.

Our meeting does a good job of sharing chores such as washing dishes, cleaning, and yard work between men and women. We should all be aware of and sensitive to personal preferences and boundaries of touch and topics of conversation when interacting with persons of either gender.

Several people have left meeting recently. Some here feel that they may have said or done the wrong thing and offended someone. There are many reasons why people leave, and often they have little to do with us.

It is good to remember that a clearness committee can help people deal with sensitive issues. Healthy meetings do not let one or two people control the tone of the meeting and make others crazy or guilty. When the harmony of the meeting is threatened, the Ministry and Oversight Committee can act as "choir director" to help restore health and harmony. Harmony within our group is not an easy goal. When we are able to express ourselves honestly in an environment of love and trust, become closer through shared activities, respect each other's differences and see "That of God" in each person, even those with whom we disagree, we will have taken important steps toward achieving harmony in our meeting.

5. MUTUAL CARE

Query: How do we respond to each other's personal needs and difficulties in sensitive and useful ways? Do we encourage both men and women to share in care giving?

What are we doing to welcome and draw members and attenders of all ages into the fellowship of the meeting?

How do we help our children feel the loving care of the meeting? What do the children contribute to the meeting?

How do we keep in touch with inactive and distant members and attenders?

Selected Response: Our community is blessed with a sensitivity that responds to the needs and challenges of members and friends-in-need in compassionate, appropriate, and thoughtful ways.

We cherish the example of a caring commitment that one member has shown for the past fourteen years. By caring for his elderly mother, he has allowed her to remain in her home and continue as a close part of our meeting family. Her recent passing has saddened us all and our community feels truly diminished.

Although we do not now have children who regularly attend Meeting, we have concerns and commitments within the community that exhibit loving care for all children. Members are involved with Crisis Intervention, child abuse issues, the court advocate CASA program, and a children's art group.

The outreach events that we sponsor such as a rummage sale, ice cream social, and quilt show are opportunities to include attenders and new members in affairs of the Meeting and to give those outside our community a glimpse into the Quaker experience.

6. EDUCATION

Query: How can we most effectively foster a spirit of inquiry and a loving and understanding attitude toward life?

What effort are we making to become better acquainted with the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, our Judeo-Christian heritage, the history and principles of Friends, and the contributions of other religions and philosophies to our spiritual heritage?

In what ways can we encourage an educational process that is consistent with the values Friends cherish? How do gender based expectations affect the goals we set and the way we learn?

Do we take an active and supportive interest in schools, libraries and other educational resources in our communities and elsewhere?

How do we prepare ourselves and our children to play active roles in a changing world?

Selected response: Our First Day School regularly studies

Quakerism and the Bible, and we are pleased that some of our grade school children are standing up at school as Friends and against war. It would be a good idea to donate books in which Quakerism is explained to public and/or school libraries.

We recognize that our kids are still exposed to gender and sexual preference prejudice in society, and we need to provide an alternate view, especially for young teens who are forming their gender identities. Some of our children are concerned about homosexuality and not wanting to appear to be gay. We need to be aware of our children's adult role models, of the attitudes they're exposed to and taught in school.

We do encourage our children to question the status quo, in First Day School and in discussions at home. We talk to our kids about what we, and those we admire, have done. We ask questions and challenge authority in front of and with our children. Our children participate with us in service projects such as Brush Up Nebraska, directly learning that we value giving of ourselves.

Some of us remember rebelling against our parents and their churches when we were young. Often the problem was hypocrisy or inconsistency. When we discuss our ideals and admit our shortcomings it might be easier for children to understand and accept both our religious principles and our human flaws.

Second selected response: We feel the need to nurture within our children a wholesome balance of trust and common sense in this sometimes unsafe world. One of our members mentioned seeing a T-shirt that read, "children need to be seen, heard and listened to." We support programs in the school that teach conflict resolution and mediation skills.

A law student in our group raised a concern that higher, as it exists today, often promotes hierarchical rather than democratic values. Children need to have a healthy balance in their lives of activities that nurture their bodies, minds, and spirits. In order for children to gain self-esteem, they need to experience success. We feel the public education frequently places too much emphasis on competitive athletics, causing children who aren't skilled in athletics to experience rejection. We were reminded that meeting First Day School needs is the responsibility of everyone in the meeting. A suggested learning experience would be to have children interview adults in the meeting in order to learn what adults do in the world.

7. HOME AND FAMILY

Query: How can we make our homes places of love and hospitality? What different expectations do we hold for women and men, boys and girls? How can we bring more equality into our relationships?

How do we develop and maintain lines of communication?

In what ways do we share our deepest experiences, struggles, concerns and beliefs with our children and others, yet encourage them to develop their potential as the Spirit leads them?

What place do we make in our daily lives for meditation, spiritual renewal and reading of inspiring literature, such as the Bible?

How does our Meeting support families of all kinds?

Selected response: One opinion was quoted to the effect that "a home is a place you go out from," not a place you retreat to.

More than one person observed that the nature of the physical plant of the home has real importance.

It was noted that children often display opinions regarding gender roles that do not derive from parental influence.

It is true that "rest, recreation and creative activities" are important. It is also true that it can require real effort and planning to make sure that we have these.

A sense of humor is a vital asset.

It was observed that our "friendly suppers" contribute to making our homes "places of love and hospitality."

Some published responses in Iowa Conservative minutes were read and considered helpful. These included saying that (1) one should not consider other people to come from the same framework that one has one's self; and (2) one should not expect the very young to have the same maturity of decision-making capacity that their elders have; i.e. a home is not a democracy. Nevertheless, one person reported growing up in a family in which there was a surprising amount of equality between the parents and the children. The children were trusted without special scrutiny, there were no curfews and the children could join in the adult discussions of such things as family finances as if they were adults. This atmosphere worked out all right, without calamity.

Although admiration was expressed for some families' practice of scheduling regular family meetings to discuss important issues of living together, some people reported that attempts to do this had fallen through, as they had turned out to be embarrassingly artificial.

Games can provide a good opportunity for communication. So can other activities that are performed together.

For meditation, spiritual renewal, etc. a person may prefer setting aside a certain time of the day (e.g. very early or very late) or a certain day of the week.

Offspring can desire greater closeness to their parents, to be let in on the workings of the parents' inner lives. Fathers are sometimes aloof, frustrating this desire.

8. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Query: How do we center our lives in the awareness of God the Spirit, so that all things may take their rightful places?

How do we structure our individual lives in order to keep them uncluttered with things and activities? How does Meeting help us examine our personal lives for simplicity?

Do we choose recreational activities which foster mental, physical and spiritual health?

How are our lives affected by tobacco, alcohol and drug use? What can we do to deal with problems resulting from their use? What can we do to recognize and deal with unhealthy ways we treat ourselves?

How do we ensure that we act with fairness and integrity?

Are we sensitive to our own use of language which may be offensive or oppressive to others?

Selected response: "A life of unhurried peace and power takes no time, but occupies all our time"—Thomas Kelly. Time should not be set aside for peace, power, and living from the center. These should permeate all life.

Our meeting does not have an example of someone living extreme simplicity. Sometimes living low tech is not simple. Having a low impact on the environment, having a low income to avoid taxes or taking a vow of poverty are not testimonies of simplicity but they can be motivated by a wish to live with integrity and consistency. Affirming instead of swearing in legal matters represents the tradition of Quakers living with integrity and consistency. The intent of the soul is important. The same item or activity may be chosen by one for its function and spiritual import while another may choose the same item or activity to impress others or some other spiritually irresponsible reason. Personal Responsibility involves making choices to act in ways that promote, and refraining from acting in ways that will inhibit, the spiritual growth of yourself and those you are with at the time. Discussions in Meeting of personal responsibility give us ideas of how others live this out and remind us to continue to work towards it.

Clutter and activity can get in the way of peace. It takes time to find things in clutter. One attender spoke of the many cards given to frequent shoppers. She has quit carrying cards for places where they can look up her purchases on a computer. We need to keep only what we use frequently so we spend less time maintaining things we rarely use.

Personal responsibility involves trust. We can show our trust of others and the workings of the Spirit on our jobs by sharing information and physical resources.

Is the Pledge of Allegiance a pledge to the kind of personal responsibility we aspire to? Casinos in Nebraska are a legislative topic. What stand should the meeting take on this issue to promote the kind of personal responsibility we believe in? Can investing in stocks be personally responsible if the businesses are socially responsible, or is this gambling?

9. CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Query: What conflicts do we perceive between the laws of the State and our religious convictions? How do we resolve those conflicts in our lives? In what ways do we assume responsibility for the government of our community, state, nation and world?

How do we share our convictions with others? Do we express our opinions with courage, yet with love, mindful of the Divine Spirit within everyone?

How do we maintain our integrity when we find ourselves in a position of power? How do we respond when we feel powerless? Do we really respect and help those we seek to serve?

Are we careful to reach our decision through prayer and strengthen our actions with worship? Are we open to divine leadings?

Selected response: We had a thoughtful query discussion about civic responsibility, with many sharing comments and, especially, challenges we find in the query. One person noticed that some of the speakers at the Peace March in Washington, DC were contentious and directed anger at certain political leaders. He finds the Query's suggestion that we be "mindful of the Divine Spirit in everyone" a challenge for him, one that is important to keep in mind.

Another member commented on the importance of maintaining integrity when in a position of power. He believes he has little power, but realizes he has chosen to give up power in his life twice. He gave up the career of pastor and also decided later not to pursue a Master's Degree in counseling. In both instances he was uncomfortable that people asked his advice, and often did what he said. He wonders now how we can help those in power and is recently aware that much of his protest has consisted of complaints, something he would like to change; he would like to help people in power grow in their integrity.

Another observed that the more successful people in elected positions are those who do not take strong stands, and therefore do not risk losing their positions. He finds himself challenged to express his opinion without browbeating, how to listen to others in such a way that he might expand his own thinking. Someone else shared how difficult she finds it to share her thoughts in her workplace, that she is sorry still about an exchange she had during the Vietnam War with a Native American who had been drinking for three days, that she now wants to understand those who disagree with her, to listen to their guilt and fears. She sees new possibilities in asking questions of her co-workers, to think of them, rather than attack them.

One person expressed his difficulty with this query, in that he is not interested in, nor trusts politics. Someone else agreed that she struggles with discouragement and the apathy of hopelessness. She had been in San Francisco during the Peace March, told how fun the experience had been, the delight, for instance, of seeing a child carrying a sign that read, "Another 3rd grader for peace." She compared this experience to the account of someone from our meeting who went to the march in Cedar Rapids, which was much smaller, in frigid and windy weather, and how the responses from the public to the march were mixed, some of them being angry and negative. She sees the real challenge in working closer to home, where the work may be less fun and exhilarating, but where real need exists.

Again, someone expressed how she hates being in vigils, and how a small group is planning future vigils in West Branch. She struggles with carrying signs that only serve to antagonize. She does not want to participate in making George Bush or Saddam Hussein the focal points of hatred. She likes the 3rd grader's sign and thinks hers may say, "Another grandmother for peace." She finds she is afraid of mobs and of the possibility of mob action, even when the groups are very small. One has, she concluded, no idea how to measure the results or consequences of a vigil.

Another member spoke of a sign she saw years ago in Connecticut that said "Seek Peace and it will find you." She hopes her standing up for peace can be a support to a passerby, who, for instance, may be tending toward such beliefs, but has not clarified them yet.

Others commented on the Cedar Rapids vigil, one saying she found positive responses outnumbered negative ones, another pointing out the vast majority did not respond. Someone wondered which is harder for the protester, a negative response or none at all.

Finally, someone spoke to the words in the advice, "staying informed." He is aware of how in the Vietnam War we were concerned with the same struggles, and how frightening and appalling it is to be in the same place again today. Those who want power and wealth do not ever cease in pursuing those goals, but enjoy the fruits such as their yachts and fancy homes. He concluded that those who desire peace may want to reap the harvest of peace and do not stay the course so steadily, which may be at the root of our difficulties.

10. ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Query: What are we doing about our disproportionate use of the world's resources?

Do we see unreasonable exploitation in our relationship with the rest of creation? How can we nurture reverence and respect for life? How can we become more fully aware of our interdependent relationship with the rest of creation?

To what extent are we aware of all life and the role we play? What can we do in our own lives and communities to address environmental concerns?

Selected response: Balancing the need of work to support one's family and concerns for the environment was a serious concern voiced by one friend but experienced by all. Many friends spoke to this concern. As a nation, we use far more resources than other nations. There is a wide gulf between our country's priorities and those of particularly poor or underdeveloped countries. The term "American way of life" seems to be a diplomatic way of referencing our culture of consumerism. Individually, and as a community, we can learn more about public policy on the environment, speak out on issues, and discuss our concern about the environment with each other. Awareness of the disparity and the misuse of resources would be helpful programs for our meeting.

One friend pointed out that if the military spending in this country for one year were spent on food production and water disbursement, we could just about feed and bring drinkable water to almost all of the earth's population. The current relationship of humanity to the earth is spiritually unhealthy. While one friend thought that we should feel a little healthy guilt because of our role in the environmental problems, another friend questioned whether guilt is a very good motivator. A sense of disappointment was expressed because although 15-20 years ago it seemed that we were on the edge of a new enlightenment, now it seems as though we are far from it. Another perspective was shared concerning progress. We now have an EPA in the government and the term "environmentalist" is now a part of our lexicon when it wasn't much heard 20 years or so ago. Vegetarianism was suggested by a friend as a more environmentally friendly approach. An analogy that seemed to speak to many friends was a description of a beach resort for the wealthy with beautiful vistas and luxurious accommodations separated from a poor village of shacks by a line of trees and hills. Awareness of the "beach" around us and the "village" around us deepens our understanding of and action on behalf of environmental concerns. Another friend shared that many Americans follow the idea of "rugged individualism" without realizing that there is no distinct individual separated from everyone else. We are a part of each other and we carry in us, from our past and present, teachers, leaders, friends, antagonists and parents. We are physical expressions of the chemical, intellectual, spiritual, and biological connections that continue to

transform who we are and link us to each other. Because we are not separated from either the "beach" or the "village," we are wounded as much by the poverty of one as by the negligence of the other.

11. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Query: How are we beneficiaries of inequity and exploitation? How are we victims of inequity and exploitation? In what ways can we address these problems?

What can we do to improve the conditions in our correctional institutions and to address the mental and social problems of those confined there?

How can we improve our understanding of those who are driven to violence by subjection to racial, economic or political injustice? In what ways do we oppose prejudice and injustice based on gender, sexual orientation, class, race, age, and physical, mental and emotional conditions? How would individuals benefit from a society that values everyone? How would society benefit?

Selected response: Economic disparity by those in the U.S. continues to increase; disparity between countries in the western world continues to

increase, and third world countries continue to fall behind. How do we, as a government, as religious bodies and NGOs respond?

Except for the power of prayer and giving donations, sometimes we may feel helpless. The advice about spiritual nurture speaks to our condition; the need to seek spiritual guidance is necessary on a continuous basis. The power of prayer is very active; one Friend has found a Buddhist prayer and practice—which brings negative force in on the inhalation, and exhales love—helps to clarify prayer. Beyond prayer, how much can we do? It is important to support people who are victims of the system. Sometimes it helps people to realize they are not alone.

How are we victims? Because we live in the U.S. and are surrounded by benefits based on exploitation, we tend to think that these benefits are all right. We can address problems by what we choose to read, by the decisions we make, by being intentional, and reminding ourselves that our comfort is based on exploitation.

We are victims of the benefits we enjoy because we ultimately pay for them. We pay for benefits through legislation making basic minimum tax for corporations zero retroactive for fifteen years and by allowing corporations to put the money in offshore banks. One approach to changing these corporate practices could rest with states. The attorneys general of the states are allowed to remove the charters of these corporations if they fail to meet the conditions of the charters. Sierra Club suggests that one can fight every violation of the charter. Our soldiers have been willing to die to protect this type of system. In the state of Iowa, the "new world order" is hog confinements.

12. PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE

Query: What are we doing to educate ourselves and others about the causes of conflict in our own lives, our families and our meetings? Do we provide refuge and assistance, including advocacy, for spouses, children, or elderly persons who are victims of violence or neglect?

Do we recognize that we can be perpetrators as well as victims of violence? How do we deal with this? How can we support one another so that healing may take place?

What are we doing to understand the causes of war and violence and to work toward peaceful settlement of differences locally, nationally, and internationally? How do we support institutions and organizations that promote peace?

Do we faithfully maintain our testimony against preparation for and participation in war? Selected response: This is a topic of great concern to members of this meeting. The following ways in which we are trying to meet the challenge of peace and nonviolence were gathered from the discussion.

Peace begins with the Spirit within each of us. It requires us to follow the lines of love and forgiveness in our own lives. Then we must reach out to others in the same spirit. We have to recognize that we are not always right and be willing to listen carefully to others and weigh the issues. John Woolman's personal life is a good example of not compromising with wrong-doing, while working tirelessly and with patience to change the beliefs and actions of many around him. Protesting violence is not enough. We must practice nonviolence in our own lives.

We cannot really change government policies, but we can contribute to change by supporting good legislation, by voting carefully, and by supporting such organizations as FCNL and AFSC both financially and by word of mouth. Some of our members have attended peace rallies. We have contacted our government representatives repeatedly on various issues and should do more. We recognize that money raised by taxes is being used as a military weapon. We support a peace tax.

We are going through a period when both government and big business seem to base their policies on greed without thought of the cost in human lives. Some of us try to use smaller businesses who seem to honor their employees.

We try not to be overwhelmed by conditions in the world at the present time, and are grateful for the reports from Quaker and other concerned organizations who give us relatively unbiased views and propose ways in which we can work for nonviolence and peace.