

IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE) 2004 QUERIES AND SELECTED RESPONSES

We listened carefully to the first eight queries and selected answers from our monthly meetings. We will read the other four queries and answers at another session if way opens. The reading and answering of queries is one of the most important things we do. We are pleased to hear that our monthly meetings are grappling with these advices and queries and their answers. Through hearing these answers we are given a glimpse of the Spirit at work in our meetings. This is a treasured time during annual sessions for many of us.

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: Personal preparation is the key to how meaningful a meeting for worship will be for each of us. The Sunday School hour preceding meeting continues to mean much to those who attend, often contributing to our preparation. We sense that our meetings are usually held in the Light of the Living Spirit. Appreciation was expressed during our discussion of this query for the gift of silence in our noisy world. What goes on in our daily lives is very important to our spiritual life, and we hope that each one who comes finds comfort and inspiration in the living silence.

We recognize the historical description of God as a male father figure can be hurtful for many. Most of us are not uncomfortable with this image, but we do try to use more inclusive gender neutral terms in describing our own religious experience. Sometimes this produces new insight into overly familiar phrases and Bible passages. The vocal ministry of our meeting, while not frequent, contributes to the spiritual life of the meeting. We try to recognize and value all spiritual gifts.

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 ponder why many Friends raised in the Meeting do not stay with it. Even William Penn's sons didn't remain as Friends. It is important for each of us to choose our faith. The issue of sharing faith requires us to walk a fine line: how to share without feeling as if you are "recruiting". Because of a lack of understanding, Quakers may seem "strange" or "weird" to outsiders. Because we don't proselytize, we wonder how hard it is for others to find out about Quakers.

In terms of visible philanthropy, we are more comfortable with the Biblical injunction from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, "let not the right hand know what the left hand doeth." This is a spiritual matter. When you give this way, the idea is to enrich the world and not the giver.

We are conscious of our different approach to many common cultural views. Being a Quaker is a very personal thing. Many times we strive to make our presence known to the community by example and precept. Our aim is not to push our religion but rather live it so that it may be seen.

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: The key to a good business meeting stems from answers to the questions: How do we dissent? How do we respond to Friends who express dissent? It's important to speak up about a topic so that we all know how people feel. It's also important for us to respond openly to those opinions. The ability for someone to express disagreement about an issue without feeling defensive is very important. We need to foster this environment.

How do we attain a "sense of the meeting" regarding decisions? Sometimes it comes readily. Sometimes we wait; postponing a decision until resolution becomes clear. Sometimes a third option is created (instead of the original opposing two options) and agreement is attained. For decisions we wait on, we need to continue to work on the issue, not just ignore it. Sometimes a statement can be made that gets people thinking about different approaches to the problem and leads the discussion in different directions.

The "worshipful" part of the business meeting experience often comes from the way we treat each other during the meeting.

When two or more Friends disagree how does the meeting proceed and accomplish its goals? Friends use the word clearness as a way of reaching an agreement or even a compromise. Sometimes clearness is attained simply by those in dissent saying nothing. Yet some argue simply because they enjoy the emotion of a good debate. If this Friendly? If God had wanted us to always agree He would have made us all alike. Strength and clearness come from diversity. God can speak to all of us at the same time. The problem is we all don't listen in the same way. But that is as it should be. The line between being right and being wrong is often blurred, and not always there. It is much more important to nurture that of God in everyone than to always be on what is considered the right side of every question. One example is when the meeting first turned aside my request to be a member. The time was not yet right so that

was the right answer then, just as the next time the request was made saying yes was the right answer then, for me and for all, I believe. The worshipfulness of this example is that in the time between the two opposite decisions, true spiritual growth took place and continues even now.

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: It is painful to reflect on past divisions that tore this meeting apart.

Jesus never equivocated. "Love others as I have loved you". That is the way he lived: thieves on both his right and left, while saying "tonight you shall be with me in heaven."

We struggle to find the love that can heal the ruptures between us. Issues of identity are the most difficult to resolve by thought. Perhaps the answer lies in cultivating a forgiving spirit, and looking to that of God in ourselves and seeking to address that of God in those with whom we disagree.

We seek to know what it truly means to "hold someone in the light". How is this different from simply praying for them? Perhaps when we endeavor to hold someone in the light, we are also praying for ourselves to be illuminated by the love and grace of God.

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: We have no program in place for the small number of teenagers who attend our meeting. We are seeking creative ways in which the meeting can help to meet their needs. We are exploring ways to spend more one-on-one time with them since there are so few of them. We look at the fine example of Iowa Yearly Meeting as they provide youth retreats and youth week-ends which take place throughout the year. The children in our meeting are very important to us; they contribute to the richness of our meeting. First Day School provides an opportunity for adults in the meeting to become better acquainted with children. One person suggested that the children might enjoy taking turns hosting an adult during First Day School.

As individuals, we need to be mindful and ready to be called into difficult situations that arise when people in our meeting need attention during illness or when they would like visitation from Friends. Meeting individuals are also sometimes in a position to ease difficult transitions that members and attenders may have in their living or working situations.

Because we are a small meeting, there are more leadership possibilities. Gender sharing has always been strong in our meeting.

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: We assume our second hour discussions foster a spirit of inquiry among adults. Children in religious education classes seem eager to learn. A spirit of loving and understanding is learned by example.

Several times religious education classes from other churches have attended meeting. We wondered whether we've missed an opportunity to ask them about their beliefs.

Quakerism 101 classes were held last year in pre-meeting sessions, and are being continued once a month this year. One recently was about the book of Thomas, which is not in the Bible. People who read about other religions sometimes share in meeting.

We're struggling with providing an education process consisted with Friends' values for our young Friends, and in decisions about the educational needs of our children.

One of our members was elected to the school board and exposed the school system to Friends' values, but decided not to run for re-election. We spoke to the issue of gay and lesbian youth at a special meeting of the Des Moines School Board several years ago. Several members teach in the schools and bring values with them.

None of our students attend Scattergood at present. Quite a few attend Camp Woodbrooke, where they're exposed to Quaker values. We ordered Quaker book covers for our students to use at school instead of the ones the military services provide.

Friends whose children are grown serve as role models - perhaps unconsciously - for young parents. The activism of some Friends also provides a role model. Preparation for a changing world requires prayer.

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: We asked ourselves the question: What constitutes a "family" or "families?" We feel this would include the extended family, even though few extended families in our society live under the same roof. It would also include blended families arising from more than one marriage. It would include gay families. We realize that a family is sometimes a fragile bonding of people. This fragility makes it vital that we keep lines of communication open, and keep our own minds open, to a variety of ways of viewing the world. For instance, being a vegetarian may seem right for one member of the family and not for another. Our meeting doesn't put a heavy emphasis on Bible training; however, we realize it plays an important role in art, literature, and religions in our culture, and should not be neglected. We suggested different ways in which spiritual renewal can occur. This can happen individually or in groups as we seek recreation and relaxation. Meditation or simply taking a walk may accomplish this for us. Making our homes places of hospitality is a special, yet important, challenge in our busy world.

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: It is difficult to feel serene knowing our country is contributing heavily to the violent chaos in the world. It is important to find time to be quiet and reflect on what is happening. A walk in the woods, worshiping together at meeting, gathering in small discussion groups can help us be centered by divine guidance and help us to live our lives in the light.

During Mid-Year Meeting Richard Johnson spoke to us about his use of the queries in his classroom. This is a very good tool to use in discussions with those who disagree with us. By asking questions we can try

to understand their viewpoints and share our share our concerns with them. The queries have always been valuable to our Meeting and to each of us personally as we evaluate our faith and practice.

Dealing with the clutter in our lives is an ever present challenge.

Several families in our meeting have moved to smaller homes and have recycled through the rummage sale, sold and given away items and still have more than needed. Letters, photos, diaries etc. are an important part of our personal history and are precious to us.

Families are too busy with sports, TV, computers etc. Many are overweight and living unhealthy lifestyles. We are not always tuned into ourselves, often denying our sadness or hurt feelings. Our society offers band aid solutions take a pill and get over it. We need to recognize the signs that create the need for self-medication in the form of alcohol and drugs. There are tools and skills available to help people process these emotional needs and challenges.

We need to try to find a balance between the activities of living a responsible life and finding quiet times to be open to guidance by the Divine Spirit that nurtures us.

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 find it difficult being a member of a larger society when things are going on that we do not agree with. At the present, terrorism and religious differences are issues that are creating conflicts. We must find the solutions to these problems in order to have peace in the world. In a democracy we hope that the best things will rise to the top and find dominance, and that by careful thought and deliberation, this will be what occurs in our society. Our faith wavers when we see that things that are bothersome rise to the top. It is important to express our opinions in ways that will be heard. We are grateful to have alternatives to demonstrate our disagreements. There are many options to voice our concerns such as writing letters or talking to our elected representatives. These avenues give us the ability to let our voices be heard.

Someone mentioned a bumper sticker saying "If you believe in peace, work for justice." No matter how much money is spent on a problem, if justice is not achieved, society will not be benefitted.

We have often used the phrase "Speak truth to those in power," but sometimes we wonder what, or whose, truth is correct. Although God's truth is absolute, our understanding of it is a searching process. A big challenge today is deciding what "truth" is as a nation, community or society. A lot of decisions we

need to make are not always black and white. An example of this is when we pay taxes. Our money is used for programs that we support and some that we definitely do not support.

Most of us don't feel powerful, but sometimes we are in positions of power, such as clerking meeting or being president of an organization. We should not avoid these positions for fear of being the one in power. When we go to see our elected representatives, they are the ones in power, but when they go to their governing bodies they may feel powerless also. Power in itself is not a bad thing. It is what activates society's agenda. There is an equilibrium between being active and passive, similar to forces in nature which includes the power of regeneration in the spring and the power of reflection in the fall. If we are open to what is divine we will have the strength to stand up to power that is unjust.

There are several things we do at school to help in our community and solve conflicts.

Emily's class volunteers on the fourth Wednesday each month to help with the free lunch program held at the Wesley Center. Four students go to help serve food and clean up.

Grades 3-6 have a student council. The representatives are elected from each class. Thomas served this school year. The adults set the rules and student council only decides a few things. This year they decided how to raise money for homeless people in Iowa City. They also voted to raise money to adopt a raptor.

There are also conflict managers to supervise grades K-4 at recess. It's a good idea but doesn't always work. Some kids with a problem don't want to solve it.

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: Locally, the proposed new mall will promote increased consumption of the earth's resources and affect the environment and citizens within miles of the site. We want to stop the proposed mall from being built and will work individually to oppose it. We are concerned that our community is following an environmentally irresponsible path that will not bring us the tax revenue promised.

The natural cycles on earth are delicately balanced. Our interference in these cycles can cause great damage to us and other creatures. For instance, trace amounts of the most common drugs we take are found in our drinking water and that in turn negatively affects our reproduction and overall health.

When "obsolete" computers are thrown away the toxic substances in them pollute the water. In some poor countries where our computers are dumped, the people who take them apart for scrap suffer ill health effects. We are, in effect, exporting our pollution problems for others to deal with.

We can help by keeping trash to a minimum, buy things we can use up, recycle or give away. In Kenya, everything is used, from empty cans, newspapers, plastic, used clothing, etc. Here people have so much, it's hard to give things away.

Sometimes it seems futile to conserve energy, because others will come along and waste it without thinking. People who walk are commented on as strange in a culture where many drive everywhere they go. Walking is seen as an inconvenience. Many towns are built around vehicles, not people, so we are forced to be dependent on our cars. This disconnects us from nature and the environment, divides people by class, and contributes to obesity. Walking or biking helps us have time to think quietly and reconnects us with nature.

Where are the positives? Effective environmental protections include a peaceful world, as war causes many environmental disasters. Our peace efforts are also clean earth efforts. We can all join and help the smart growth group here in town.

When thinking of ourselves as part of the world around us, one young Friend wondered, "What if I were a tree growing in an oil spill?" Our own pollution may be poisoning us and hurting other creatures. Some forms of plastic can choke fish or birds.

Some suggestions to ease pollution and littering include solar cars and Earth Day clean ups. We can use ethanol, recycle all kinds of waste, ride a bike or walk instead of driving, plant trees, use resources without wasting and buy locally produced food and other products.

Quaker ideas such as simplicity help us be less wasteful and rely on each other more. War is destructive to the environment, and working for peace, another Quaker ideal, helps both the environment and other people.

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: There are many, many social and economic injustices in the world.

Most clothing we wear is not made in this country, but has been made by people in other countries. Generally those people have been exploited by the system, have poor working conditions, and are not being paid a living wage. We can avoid contributing further to this problem by buying second hand clothing or buying from catalogues and stores that specifically carry clothing made by unexploited workers.

Agriculture is another area where the United States makes things more difficult for economies of other countries. We dump our surplus crops, selling to others below the cost of production, which drives

down world price of these crops. Struggling countries can't get a fair price for their crops. Countries should try to produce at least some of their own food so they are less dependent upon others.

Correctional facilities need to improve educational opportunities for inmates, otherwise they will just return to prison after release. We also need to provide incentives to companies so they will be willing to hire released inmates. Such a high number of people are incarcerated now, hiring practices will have to change or employers won't be able to find workers. This won't happen until there is a worker shortage.

The correctional system focuses on punishment, not rehabilitation. This discourages education. The system is perverse. The inmates have no power, so there is no accountability for the treatment they receive.

Writing letters to people in power DOES sometimes have an effect, even though it may seem like a fruitless effort. Socially responsible retirement investing, while a noble idea, is very, very difficult to accomplish these days. Everything is so complex; it is impossible to be pure. We do our best and keep asking questions!

I wish to take issue with one statement in the discussion of this query. "The inmates have no power, so there is no accountability for the treatment they receive." Ah but inmates do have power. Sometimes we feel like we don't have any, but yes we do. For instance, just this Saturday morning an inmate friend and I decided to go around and pick up the trash on the yard. Now there are inmates that are assigned to do this work and be paid a low wage, \$1.21 a day to do it, and as a punishment inmates are often given "extra duty" and forced to go out and pick trash under escort of an officer. But today for an hour we two decided just to do it. It was within our power to do so. We asked no one's permission save our own. Many stopped by and asked what we had done to get extra duty, as a punishment, and were shocked to learn we were doing this just to take care of our own limited environment. One even decided to help us. But we had the power to effect change within our world all on our own.

If a prisoner wanted to be educated, NOTHING can stop him. Lack of school opportunities hurts. That is true, but it will never stop that prisoner from writing off for courses, or reading every book in our limited library, or from being befriended by someone of knowledge who will visit them and share some of what they have learned in life and in school. I now have a degree from Maggie and Barney which no school could ever issue to me! But it is one I value a lot. One I chose to undertake by meeting with them and visiting and sharing silence together.

One friend helping to educate one friend can go a long ways to bringing about social justice. The GED book purchased for David Traxler is more than just a book. It was and is an incentive that says you believe in him and a trust that he will honor your trust in him.

It is a well-known policy that Kawasaki is a great employer of men on parole, just out of prison. Why? Because they realize that a man on parole will show up to work because his parole officer will be checking up on him. Plus Kawasaki receives tax incentives for hiring ex-convicts that are on parole. Some have stayed on after their parole is over and stayed employed there for some time. Sadly they are the exception and not the rule in Lincoln. The half-way houses available to new releases limit your stay to thirty days, barely enough time to find an adequate job, and earn enough to get an apartment and transportation. Who can bridge the gap between prison and the outside so that no one ever need return here? Not more government programs! Not the right sort of governor, not the community corrections

programs. It ought to be the basis of all we do, alas it is not, and this is not Eden. But a perfect world begins with perfecting a friendship with just one person who has none.

12. PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE

Query: *What are we doing to education 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: We tend to educate ourselves well about international and national areas of conflict by using different news sources other than the popular media. There do not seem to be areas of personal conflict within our meeting, but these are more difficult to see and evaluate. We are less sure of our response to them when they do occur.

We are conscious of sounds of inter-family conflict in our neighbors adjacent to the meetinghouse but puzzled as to how to counter this for the sake of the children within the families. We try to be courteous and warm when we do have opportunities to interact with these children and perhaps these small personal contacts can make a difference. We are reminded that it is necessary to forget about our own emotions and hesitations and respond to needs we see with faith that we will be led. "God doesn't call those who are qualified, but qualifies those who are called." Although we tend to feel that our system of social services is more capable of dealing with the needs we see, we also recognize that in spite of the best intentions it can be an obstruction to constructive aid.

Our faith in the long history of the Quaker Peace Testimony is strong and we try to do what we can to support institutions and organizations that promote peace. The current media reports that keep pointing out the misrepresentations that has been used by our administration for the Iraqi war hopefully will encourage recognition of the real goals for the invasion. Because the majority of Americans seem to support current policy, in a sense we are all perpetrators of violence in spite of ourselves. We are aware of how closely linked violence is to economic opportunities and exploitation. Other than protesting to our legislators, there seems little we can do to counter this.