

## IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE) 2006 QUERIES AND SELECTED RESPONSES

We listened carefully and with interest to the yearly meeting queries and selected monthly meeting responses as prepared by the yearly meeting assistant clerk. We are inspired by many of the responses and continue to find value in hearing selected responses at 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:** Preparations for meeting for worship are relaxing, clearing the mind, and giving thanks, which lessens worries. One Friend finds praying for blessings helps. Another likes doing some Bible study before Meeting. Some find that arriving at Meeting early helps their preparation.

Meeting for worship is an intensification of what happens in daily life, the bringing to the foreground of what is normally in the background. Some experience an expectation that happens in old meetinghouses. Others prefer to let thoughts flow freely but without attachment.

Our meeting does not refer directly to the divine that often. Referring to Christ or God is fairly rare. Language can get in the way when trying to communicate about the divine. Some react negatively to various terms often used to describe or point to the divine. The words of language are symbols, which point to something higher. Many Friends come from other church backgrounds whose beliefs form a background for meeting.

It is important how we live outside of meeting. How effectively can we take worship outside of meeting into daily life? There seems to be a tension between belief systems and new revelations of truth.

### 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 do encourage intervisitation with other meetings and Friends groups, but have not found a satisfactory way of following through. We greatly appreciate the visitors we have had who have shared with us—the Quaker Youth Weekend and others—but few from our meeting have found or made time for a similar visit to other meetings.

A brochure explaining Quaker beliefs and practices and our monthly meeting in particular continues to be used in Welcome Wagon packets, and we have recently updated the information in it. We appreciate a recent gift of a new all-weather sign for the roadside from one of our members. We still host an occasional quilt show and luncheon that give us the opportunity to share in detail with groups who attend.

Sharing our beliefs with others often poses problems of explaining what we believe in terms others understand. In today's political climate with so much acrimony and bias couched in religious terms, it is difficult to reach out to those with whom we disagree. We search for ways of emphasizing the idea that moral values begin within the home and family rather than in the public domain. We are reminded that finding a way to declare our "truth" in a non-threatening way is important. We recognize the importance of asking others "how" and "why" they believe rather than challenging their beliefs. This means we have to be quiet ourselves and listen carefully to what they are saying. As in so many areas, listening carefully seems to be key to real communication.

### 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:** Meeting for Business does not *begin* with worship as recommended in the Advice; it *is* worship. Sometimes we descend into mere conversation, but we are drawn back into a state of worship by pauses for reflection after serious things are said by joining in silence as the clerk composes each minute, and by considering each minute before proceeding to the next matter on the agenda. Occasional and appropriate emergence of humor in our sessions helps us maintain our humility, lest we take ourselves too seriously. The worshipful nature of attending to business is difficult to explain to persons new to Friends, but it is an important part of the manner of Friends.

Individuals in the meeting feel strongly, and sometimes speak passionately, about particular issues. We seek to be aware of the sense of the meeting, speaking our piece and then holding our peace rather than unduly pressing personal agendas if our personal concerns are not shared by the meeting at large. We need to communicate more effectively that although the meeting as a whole may not take up individual concerns, we accept that differences exist among us, and we support individuals in their own work on concerns important to them. We are reminded that the role of the individual in a Friends meeting for business is not to strike out on one's own, but an opportunity to share one's insights, toward clarifying and completing the group's understanding of Truth.

### 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:** The second paragraph of the Advice states that "We endeavor to practice humility, attempting to understand positions of others and being aware of the possibility that we may be mistaken." Being aware that we may be mistaken is probably the most difficult task among people.

We found it interesting that the query asks us to name topics that we avoid. Right away we named one of those topics and got distracted from the harmony theme as it was briefly discussed.

In our group we seem to have unanimity of feeling on politics, so we don't often discuss it. In some groups of people, certain topics aren't worth discussing when each side knows the other side will not change its view.

We looked at how we have dealt with conflict historically. There have been several issues over the past years that have been difficult, among them qualifications for clerk, support of same-sex relationships, and membership of prisoners. We need to be aware that there are lots of gray areas, not just black and white. As we get closer and closer to an issue, we tend to see more and more of the other side. Having a high regard for each other helps us to deal with problems more easily.

How do we deal with irrational behavior? What we might consider irrational can be very rational in someone else's mind. Quakers believe that controversy and conflict can be mediated by discussion and understanding. To obtain resolution, this must go in two directions: give and take. What if neither one understands the other? It is very difficult.

## 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:** The meeting feels that in general we do provide for the mutual care of children, absent or inactive members, and newcomers, and that over time we will continue to share our inner lives with openness in order to bring us closer together with the goal of creating true heartfelt connections and mutual care among all members.

## 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:** Education continues throughout life. People here are always investigating some topic. We share things we read. This encourages others to keep growing.

Some worry that our children don't get the biblical background they did. We have a small number of children and struggle with the challenge of exposing them to the love of God.

Other churches can go to a religious bookstore and pick up a packet for the semester. There are Quaker curricula about various subjects, and for different lengths of time.

One told of having rejected Sunday school because of dogma. Teachings of Jesus on loving kindness, connected to experiences each week, could be discussed and could stimulate curiosity.

Two of our members attended divinity school, where students get involved in studies about Jesus. One of them said that answering queries helps his spiritual development.

A member who transferred from another meeting said people there shared their spiritual journeys. We've had new people do that, but then they want to hear ours. We used to take turns doing that with the children.

Doing this kind of sharing was suggested. We do some of it as a byproduct of discussing sections of the Faith and Practice revisions.

## 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:** Working, playing and worshiping together bond our families and communities. The patterns of these activities create moments that instill values, often when we are unaware of them. These events are important to our growth and development. When we value doing nothing, taking walks, watching birds, and enjoying nature we create spaces to nurture.

While there have been changes to the roles of men and women, many women still feel the final responsibility of the home. Even with all the labor-saving appliances and husbands more willing to help, many women come home from a job outside the home and do the household chores of cooking and childcare. Men who have lived on their own are more self-reliant.

Computers and cell phones seem to discourage personal communication. Parents can encourage communication by limiting computer, TV, and phone time, and by using opportunities while riding in the car, doing chores, etc., to respectfully listen and engage in conversation. It is important to share deeply held values and feelings, writings, journals and family stories.

Some young people seem to be in conflict. On the one hand, there is an attitude of entitlement; of dropping out if they don't like what is happening. But on the other side, there is fear. They are afraid to challenge authority—teacher or boss—for fear of not getting the grades they need or fear of losing their jobs.

We welcome others and are interested in them and their beliefs. We are happy to see how the New Horizons Center has enhanced the family feeling for those who attend. We feel a strong sense of family in our meeting. We know we can depend on each other.

## 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:** Several folks spoke of the need to simplify physical aspects of living by removing clutter that no longer has meaning from their homes. Sometimes we wait until renting out our homes or moving out before we let go of things no longer essential to our lives. Giving these items to others who are in real need, we believe, is a form of personal responsibility.

One member spoke of her recent stay in Mexico as a time of learning how to slow down in a culture that moves at a slower pace than we do in the U.S. She felt that she had to re-shift gears to the faster pace of the U.S. upon returning to this country.

Sometimes we fill our minds with unproductive thoughts and worry, a non-tangible form of clutter. This prevents us from being fully present in each moment. Someone expressed the idea that meeting can be a touchstone, a place where we share support for each other, where we share ideas, where we can set life-affirming priorities, and where we can become more centered in our lives.

## 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 feel numerous conflicts between the laws or at least actions of the state and our religious convictions. Primarily this has to do with the conduct of war, and we all continue to try to make ourselves clear on this point. We try to influence the government through non-registration, voting (although it is rare to find a non-war candidate to vote for), choosing our purchases, lobbying and writing letters to the editor.

We are distressed when we see people advocating peace angrily. We try to share our convictions with others in ways that make them more receptive. Asking questions can be more effective than confrontation. Speaking from our own experience and trusting that we will be heard sometimes works when we least expect it.

We have power in teaching and in management. Handling that power responsibly requires us to listen, to ask others to help us understand them, and by honestly acknowledging the ways in which we do not have control of a situation.

Often we feel powerless when we are writing letters to elected officials who do not seem to be paying attention. Sometimes they too are powerless, being subject to their peers and constituents. The issues on which they have the strongest convictions may not even come to their attention.

In sum, we felt that being responsible citizens and people of faith is not easy. We intend to strive to communicate with others, even those with whom we disagree or over whom we have power, with respect and out of our own experience. We must have faith in our convictions and our own way of expressing them, even when the outcome is not clear.

## 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:** Our meeting cares deeply about environmental responsibility. One member recently attended the steering committee of Quaker Earthcare Witness in Chicago. Someone there spoke to the need for Quakers to consider whether there is something we can no longer do because we care about the earth. In the past, Quakers decided to no longer purchase things produced by slave labor. Regarding the environment, our efforts are almost entirely personal. We are vegetarian, or we don't dye our hair. We need a public symbol that expresses the level of our concern. What is it we can no longer do? If we no longer drove cars, we would be moved toward closer community. How long can we continue to drive cars?

In Genesis we learn that God created the plants and animals and it was good. Then God created humans and that was also good. We save the earth because we are equal to it in its goodness.

What is our responsibility? We believe it is not to improve our individual lives but to bear a public witness for our concern.

## 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:** The meeting expresses some discouragement and much concern about our role as individuals and as a nation in contributing to the inequity among nations in the areas of social and economic

justice. It is easy to be lost in a swirl of that discouragement, which we acknowledged is driven both by the complexity of the crisis and by our worry and fear. We noted that we tend to think about the “haves” and “have-nots” in our discussion, which leads us to a discussion of material goods rather than gifts of the spirit. Is the growth of spiritual gifts hindered by our material goods? Is our joy limited by them?

While recognizing that simple solutions are not efficacious, we determined, in an effort to lift our gloom, to be cognizant of all small steps we take to lighten our environmental footprint on the planet, and to note them down to post on the bulletin board or gather in a box on the table in the lobby. Mark Patton will collect these and report to us.

## 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:** Peace has not only a global, but also local and home life meanings. These are tied together seamlessly.

As a meeting, we have an annual Tax Day protest. We have supported one of our members in documenting himself as a conscientious objector. We participated in an annual community peace march. We support Iowa Peace Network and local peace groups. We have signs in our yard supporting peace. Reconciliation is a real need in our community. The meeting has seen some people leave, but those who are here are committed to working together and working through differences with an attitude of love.

We need to question our pride and be aware of it. When we speak, we need to be aware of how we are received and how we are heard, in order to promote peace in our homes, meeting, and our community. When we listen, we often need to look past the words to hear the person and understand that person’s situation and feelings. We all make mistakes, both in speaking and listening, and need to keep this in mind as we communicate.

The leaders (such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.) who promoted peace have had compassion for victims and perpetrators of violence. How do we keep from being desensitized to news of war and news of violent crime in our communities? We are not sure.

Mediation is becoming an alternative to judicial solutions to conflict. We encourage, support, and participate in this. Being open about our position is critical to resolving conflict. As a nation we are not doing this in Iraq. Being committed to gaining an understanding of someone else’s position is equally important.

We are dissatisfied with our ability to oppose war, which would require us to quit our jobs, turn off our furnaces, sell our cars, and refuse to pay war taxes, were we fully committed.