

IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE) 2007 QUERIES AND SELECTED RESPONSES

We listened carefully to the reading of the Queries from the Yearly Meeting Discipline and the monthly meeting responses to them as selected by the assistant clerk. These answers remind us why we as Friends have queries instead of creeds that try to say exactly what we believe. We continue to find value in the queries, answering them as meeting communities, and hearing each other's responses. All the responses by our monthly meetings are in the library for perusal during these 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: As we endeavor to gain clarity with the concept of the Divine, we realize that our choice of words and definitions inevitably become limited and inadequate. Our silence and expectant waiting reflect an awareness of these mysteries and keep us humble in our search for the Truth.

We acknowledge that gender language can influence perceptions and disquiet the search for a meaningful relationship with historic spiritual sources, such as the Bible. We seek to create an environment that nurtures the many paths that that we are seeking.

Although vocal ministry is the most noticeable form of Ministry in our meeting for worship, we also recognize and celebrate that other ministries exist beyond the vocal worship. As we discuss the concepts of recorded ministers and traveling ministry, we are mindful of our expectations in silence and careful to be aware of prepared agendas as we settle into Meeting for Worship. The ministry of the Meeting should be "in the life." It should speak to the heart-felt needs of those 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: There are several ways in which we are able to share who we are with the local community. Through the Area Religious Council, we have opportunities to host ecumenical services occasionally, which bring others from the community to the meetinghouse. The Council is putting a brochure together to introduce newcomers to the churches and meetings in the area.

However, the fact remains that it is not easy to articulate Friend's beliefs. We're fairly comfortable with attempting to live our faith. We're clear that we need to share our convictions and to make the testimonies part of our daily lives and practice. But we are less clear about expressing our faith in words.

We are uneasy about the meanings our words can carry, and how they may be received. We shy away from the idea of proselytizing. We are aware of the potential for implied arrogance in attempts to convert others, and sharing our faith in overt ways comes closer to that than is comfortable. We see examples of people using religion as an excuse to hurt others. We are concerned that some may be reluctant to speak in Meeting, not knowing how the message will be received. Some of us may be reluctant to teach First Day School, as we're aware of all that we don't know. Yet when we leave out the words, sometimes we leave out an important part of teaching or sharing with each other, and with our young.

We reflected on our receptivity to the outreach of others. We sometimes find ourselves surprised and touched by the common ground we share with others who walk different paths. People from a great diversity of faith traditions hold the common values of compassion, concern for others, and generosity. We share a common humanity, and in that, we are able to find one another. We are aware that truth has many facets, and we want to remain open to the many ways that the grace of God is present in our lives. Perhaps the heart of Quakerism has to do with valuing and honoring the divinity in every human soul, and then attempting to live from that reality.

We considered the way that Jesus taught his disciples. They had their own feelings and responses to the radical departure from the current norms that His teaching represented. But from that teaching came wonderful examples of how we can live. We need to realize that rich and rewarding results can come from a similar dialogue among ourselves, as well as in the wider world.

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: Might there be a more accurate term than Meeting for Business? If we truly succeed in continuing Meeting for Worship as we conduct Meeting for Business, then the word business, may not express what is really occurring as we search together for truth. In a spirit-led Meeting for Business, differing personal opinions and conflict should become "beside the point."

In some meetings there is a qualitative difference between the worship and business sessions. During business there may not be enough time or silence to allow for thoughtful responses. We appreciate our clerk's gentle guidance, unhurried manner, and his gift for summarizing,

A Business Meeting works because individuals have fulfilled their responsibilities through personal leadings and on committees. It is important that each person be "present", alert to the business at hand.

An old, long established meeting needs to be particularly aware that new and young attenders need to have opportunities to experience the practices (dare we say rituals?) of the group. Our Meeting is small, and we do fairly well at balancing older, younger, and new folks for committee appointments.

We are grateful for a Peace and Social Concerns Committee that has kept us informed about important social and political issues. This has led to more active responses in our meeting and among individuals. Individuals and families that are active in groups and projects, not necessarily Quaker, but compatible with Friends' values, also contribute to the liveliness of our Meeting and Meetings for Business.

Meeting for Business doesn't seek majority rule. We remember always that consensus lies at the heart of Quaker decisions. There is some fuzziness in our understanding of this term. It can mean harmony with God and among us, although there may not be full agreement. Sense of the meeting and reaching unity are two other terms frequently used to describe a decision reached in Meeting for Business.

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: Learning about people's backgrounds and perspectives is important. Some are hesitant to speak in Meeting. We need to encourage the expression of differences, which help us to understand each other, rather than avoid topics where we have differences. Being honest is best done with understanding of others.

Shying away from conflict is a common tendency. Among Quakers there is more flexibility than in other churches, leading to some ambiguity-which is challenging but helpful. The query is helpful in reminding us to look for that of God in those who disagree with us.

The Meeting seems to be open to difference of opinions and to agree when more time is needed to reach consensus.

The "Getting to Know You" series and the "After Thoughts" have deepened relationships. After meeting, snacks have encouraged interaction.

One of our members is working on a list of members and attenders with photos. It will be posted so that it will be easy to refer to. This will help us learn names of newcomers and help them learn names of regular attenders.

It is good to be reminded to open to the Light within when we find it difficult to understand and be in harmony with others and to be forgiving of ourselves.

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 hope that sending our newsletter to all members and attenders, including folks who moved away years ago but want to keep the connection, helps us all to keep in touch.

We like to go around the circle after Meeting for Worship to share our names, announcements, joys, and concerns. It helps us to get to know each other better and build our community.

We wish that more of our attenders would come to our pre-meeting discussions, but many of them are active in the Meeting in other ways.

We wonder if we are giving enough care to those who are actively giving care to other family members. Sometimes we forget to care for those who are supporting everyone else. We find it easier to give help to others than to ask for help ourselves when we need it. We know that most people want to be independent and do things by themselves even if it takes a lot longer.

We question whether we agree with the “doctor knows best” attitude. We sometimes have a “second opinion” all on our own and want to direct our treatment and future independently of the ideas of medical professionals of family. We don’t agree with the belief that God gives us what we need and deserve, or that everything that happens is God’s will.

When someone needs help, we can be more effective if we work together.

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: As we consider what our children and grandchildren are doing in their lives as adults, it appears they are ahead of those of us who are older in being active in important issues that affect the world we live in. Perhaps this shows that we did prepare them well as children of the Meeting. We continue our support for them as best we can, even though many no longer attend Meeting.

Learning more about the Bible and our Judeo-Christian heritage is mainly left up to individuals to pursue as they choose. Those of us who attend adult Sunday School discussion hour have found the books of Marcus Borg helpful in expanding our view of the Bible and our religious heritage. Some of us also use various other sources for continuing spiritual growth and guidance. Many of us have found that asking questions is still an effective way to continue to be educated on issues. We actively support our local libraries and also our schools, as well as Scattergood Friends School. Although few of us have children in school anymore, we try to be involved in ways that we are able. Some of us take advantage of adult education courses in the graphic arts, others read a variety of materials and information sources, one is a volunteer in the local elementary school, and two are full time teachers in the public schools. We also recognize that remaining active in the affairs of our local communities is a form of education in itself.

As we consider how gender-based expectations affect Quaker goals for education and career choices, we have become aware that in the past subconsciously many of us did have different gender expectations for our own children, especially regarding careers. In a rural area, employment for girls and women was limited by the conventions of the society we lived in. Summer employment especially was more limited and much lower paying for girls. The strenuous physicality of farm work placed some of these limitations that have since been eliminated or eased with increased mechanization. Now we see changes in this attitude in general as more women move into former “male only” occupations such as the construction trades, truck driving, etc.

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 are aware that we still carry outdated expectations for gender roles at times, in spite of our best intentions. Attitudes are usually developed in childhood and are sometimes difficult to change, but we try with varying degrees of success.

One important way of maintaining lines of communication within families, we have found, is by admitting when we are mistaken in a situation. Children especially seem to respond to such admissions and hopefully learn by our example rather than always seeking to blame others for their mistakes. This same openness is also helpful in marriages.

We have expanded our definition of what constitutes a family over the years to include all types of units, and we seek to be supportive of all. We are aware, however, that there still seems to be a subtle stigma against single parents in the general society, depending on the community. We are thankful that prejudice against divorced parents seems to be less obvious and onerous than in the past.

As we considered the changes in communication techniques that are now available in this electronic age and how these affect our children and grandchildren's quality of life and development, we are struck by the complexity of keeping things in balance, especially in dealing with the life of the Spirit. Teaching by example has always been more effective than mere words, but sharing our own experiences and beliefs is also important. Conservative Friends have historically hesitated to provide much formal spiritual guidance through set forms, so that individuals may develop their own understandings of the Divine Light. This hasn't always been helpful in providing a basis for such development, however, as sometimes children have just been left confused and unsure of the roots of our faith. We are reminded that each generation has gifts of wisdom and knowledge that need to be shared.

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: From inner leading we recognize activities that energize the spiritual center, bring us peace and light, discerning these from others that detract and negatively impact our inner calm.

We are challenged by the struggles that arrive with our personal commitments and constant activities. We talked about ways to simplify our lives by being more selective in how we choose to spend our time.

We should examine what constitutes an addictive behavior or substance. Technology, food, and activities can chronically separate our attention from the “sacred center.” This requires us to remember what is important on our journey. We must sort out what is meaningful to our lives and work to create situations that lighten our physical demands and decrease our active engagement.

We are mindful of how our personal decisions impact the environment and the energy demands in the world around us. We must be responsible stewards of energy and the other world resources. This requires that we remain at the same time generous and protective of the goods with which are our entrusted.

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: This brought up registration for the draft. The point was brought up that many individuals at eighteen are too young to make the decision of whether to register or not. Our culture asks our youth too young. Many make a deliberate choice simply to blow off the government, in other words not to make a choice. As a meeting, we have to be conscious of how we handle this time in our young members’ lives.

Voting is not the only way we take responsibility for our community, state and nation. In many ways, we assume responsibility every day in little ways...for instance, buying vegetarian, purchasing from small stores, and refusing to buy products from certain companies. These are well thought out decisions that can affect our community even more than voting.

When asserting civic responsibility, our higher responsibility is to our society if the government is messing up. Laws are supposed to be just. Civic responsibility is a check and balance on the system of government.

It is easy to respond to a difference of opinion with a lack of love. Therefore, it would be valuable with strangers, even if only in mind, to try to have a sense of common ground. Though many of us speak harshly about current politics, if we had the ability to speak to George Bush, if we could look him in the eye, our words would be loving. We don’t cross the barrier and speak to those who are not of like mind often enough. One member spoke of how in a work situation, it made him feel alone if he was the only one with a certain mindset. However, over time he discovered how he could speak his mind and still get along and truly like his fellow workers. Sometimes an “I” message worked, i.e., “This is not a cause I would be willing to sacrifice my life for...or the lives of my children”. This story engendered a lively discussion, full of pithy comments. “Reaching the heart is what changes a person.” “I am not trying to convince a person on the spot. I am trying to be one of a hundred

to convince a person over time.” “Even if you disagree, paying enough attention to know what will affect a person is a form of love.”

Mostly we asked questions: Is integrity at risk if you are in a position of power? How do we discern what we need in order to be healthy inside? Isn't one of the points of pacifism to not acquiesce to violence (unjust power) being acted upon us? Quakers do not seem to be a group of people who tend to seek power. We tend to take pleasure in community; we are professionals, middle class, small business owners.

We spoke of methods of prayer...long walks talking to God, quiet meditation, journaling...and how, over time, these methods can become a wonderful life practice and leave us more open to divine leadings.

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: The conversation was lively, indicating participant interest and involvement in these issues. The group indicated awareness that the United States consumes a vast proportion of the world's resources, that our economy is based on consumption, and that the issue is complicated. There are indications that we, as a nation, are becoming more aware of our environmental responsibilities and challenges on an international scale. Such indications include the focus of the most recent *Time* magazine and Al Gore's campaign to educate the population on global warming. There continues to be a major segment of our population which is "keeping their heads in the sand" about this issue. The issue can be overwhelming. How can one individual be effective in making a change in such an overwhelming task? The extreme sides of this issue can be off-putting, with the issue such an emotional one it makes some avoid it altogether.

Discussion included water usage and irrigation specifically, fuels and transportation limitations in this country, and the ways we can impact these by limiting our use of water and energy/fossil fuels with efficiency and alternative methods which will reach the same goals. The group displayed an obvious awareness of conservation/environmental issues and ways we as individuals can conserve in our daily lives, along with a genuine interest in conserving. Attitude is important. Also, we have choices that can impact the environment relating to where we spend our money. We can build "green." We can select foods that are grown in environmentally sensitive ways (Whole Foods is an illustration). There are numerous ways to spend in an environmentally responsible way while also supporting our consumption-based economy.

Members of the group shared stories of the uniqueness of the environment, such as the simple ways birds enhance our lives, the complexities of their (bird) world, and the reminder that we are all a part of nature, just like the birds, so human activities could/should be considered as a part of nature.

Some talked about using an item until it is worn out before replacing with a new/newer item. Not all energy solutions are without controversy, such as fluorescent lights which are energy efficient but research has indicated their detrimental effect on autistic individuals, as well as disposal of their mercury content. Not many solutions are without side effects to take into consideration when making choices.

It was noted that in the last eight years several initiatives that were making a difference in an environmentally responsible way have been stopped/dropped by our government. Family planning is at the core of over-population issues and the health care issue is directly related.

Des Moines Valley Friends Meeting can look with pride to our most recent project of replacing a worn-out heating and cooling system with a geothermal system. Although the cost of the initial installation is greater, the impact on our environment is substantially improved and long-term cost of operation will be reduced. We are indeed putting our money where our stated values are. We have joined the national Friends as exemplified by the new FCNL office building in Washington, D.C., a green building. Our actions are matching our words and we hope to share these actions with a broader community to inspire more movement in this direction of environmental responsibility.

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: We find many ways in which we struggle with fairness and exploitation in our own lives. It is encouraging to see examples of those around us finding ways to try to be fair, in spite of systems that seem to encourage competition and promote injustice. For example, retail sales promote “cutthroat” competition, yet most sellers tend to work cooperatively, and to value being honest with customers.

It is a sense of fairness that prompts many of us to avoid buying things at stores if we know the low prices are partly due to exploitation of employees, suppliers, and the environment. However, economic issues are complicated. For instance, the jobs corporations provide might be so badly needed that Friends should consider other means of pressuring the corporations.

Those of us who work as teachers have opportunities to see the power of finding and valuing the different kinds of gifts students have. This is a way of answering that of God in each person.

We do benefit from socioeconomic advantages; many of us came from middle-class families and received good educations, for instance. We all benefit, whether we like it or not, from having a “military arm” that protects us and our economy. It was noted that socioeconomic advantages are helpful toward some goals, but we need to examine whether those are our goals or not. Some of us find it difficult to reach out and get to know people from different cultures and backgrounds on our own. We need some structured way to do this. Reading books by and about people we don’t meet in our everyday lives can help us to understand them.

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: Conflict is a natural part of human life. However, we do not accept that violence must also be a part of human life. Democracy was conceived as a way to settle conflict without violence. More open and honest discussions about our conflicts may be a way to prevent violence. Is the avoidance of conflict a problem that can lead to more anger and violence in our lives? Approaching conflict and situations that may give rise to conflict is a process of discernment. We must both open ourselves and listen to others as they open themselves, and be careful to balance our speaking and our listening. Our culture today is all about being busy and staying busy, but we fear this has led to a loss of civility in daily interactions. Slowing down as an alternative to being driven by agenda opens pathways that allow us to face conflict and defuse it.

Voting peace is important. Local issues can be divisive, and have been lately here in Ames around development issues. The Christian community has also become sharply divided around differing approaches to issues of morality and justice. Unfortunately, communication about these conflicts has become part of the problem when it is focused on rallying cries and slogans. Being certain in rightness rather than being certain we must listen is part of the problem. Being fearful of openness and fearful of change is part of the problem. We fear for what happens to democracy when our society's commitment to communication withers.

We do not always know how to respond to others we encounter in daily life who are victims of society's ills. Unfortunately, we encounter individuals with unhealthy habits that compound their misfortune, and supporting them without enabling their unhealthy ways can seem to require knowledge of professional counseling methods. So several of us support organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Doctors Without Borders, and Amnesty International as a way to respond positively in support of those who are hurt by poverty, war, and injustice. We also specifically considered which organizations approach peace and nonviolence issues in a manner most consistent with our understanding of these issues. We affirm the Friends Committee on National Legislation and the stabilizing presence they are maintaining in Washington. Their commitment to open communication with those with whom we have disagreements is inspiring and shows a constructive approach to conflict and politics.