

2008 QUERIES AND SELECTED RESPONSES

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: We all look forward to meeting for worship. It is an "uncluttered" time when we can start to unclutter our lives.

We find that walking or biking to Meeting helps us to prepare for worship. We often think of our poster, "Be still and cool in your own mind and spirit from your own thoughts, and then you will feel the principle of God" by George Fox, 1658.

We are glad for a diversity of people in our group. Diversity helps in decision-making—people from different backgrounds may see things from a different perspective, so someone in the group will be able to solve a problem from their own experience.

We generally have the appropriate amount of vocal messages. When someone brings a message which doesn't appeal to us personally, we realize it may be just right for someone else, and we don't let it disturb our meditation.

After meeting, we try to mention to the person who spoke that we appreciate their message. We wondered whether we should adopt the system (used in some Friends Meetings) of going around the circle after Worship with everyone giving their name and any afterthoughts or announcements they have. This way, everyone feels included in the group.

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: Our discussion reveals that our activities and involvement with other groups such as the recent Quaker Women's retreat, the Iowa Peace Network, a Good Grief group, and the Catholic Worker

community are meaningful avenues to help us build awareness of our beloved community and shared experience.

As we pursue our wider activities, we are mindful to ask whether the daily witness of our lives truly reflects our core testimonies.

Our new small building has created curiosity in our community and seems to be an opportunity to witness and acquaint others to our interests and concerns about green technology for the challenges we face as a culture.

We strive to be a light to those seeking refuge from a variety of concerns facing us in these times such as economic oppression, energy, militarism and war. Our gift as Quakers is the recognition that we probably do not have all of the answers, but we are willing to bring forth the questions.

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 is going well overall; it no longer feels rushed and yet it is often getting done earlier. Committees are doing more work and being trusted in their work, which may be contributing to this change.

We recognize, however, that we still have growth to do. For example, we sometimes make small issues into bigger ones. And we need to work on being more patient and work at finding loving ways to express our frustrations. Because people process information differently, such as some who see the small pieces of a situation and others who see the larger picture, this sometimes contributes to conflict. Or sometimes people are appreciating the social interaction meeting for business can provide while others want to follow an agenda, whether an official or personal one, which can cause tension.

While our infrastructure is much like a larger meeting, we wonder if we could simplify the process we practice. Can we do some things as a body rather than a committee, or maybe appoint an ad hoc committee rather than trying to maintain a standing committee? Our pool for committee membership is small, yet most people are on at least one committee. We wonder if those appointed are appropriate for the positions they fill, and we know we need to work on that level of truthfulness individually and in our nominating process, as well. Do we pay attention to the Spirit when called to the tasks we do? Sometimes we may get confused, wondering if the Divine is inspiring us to fill a task we are asked to do or rather providing us a moment to practice knowing ourselves better and saying no. When someone has a minority opinion on the subject, the person often steps aside, and perhaps the issue reappears another month. Time also provides a time to change our minds, to become convinced. We hope we are listening and processing each person's input, recognizing that sometimes it takes a while for this to completely occur.

There is a general lack of commitment to the Meeting beyond attending Sundays, though this is not often different than other church bodies. Committee work relies on a commitment by each member, however. Are we asking more of ourselves in our committee obligations and structure than what we can reasonably attend to?

Our care for each other and for the Meeting needs to be from the Spirit and not through social engineering of a committee. Is our work and worship Spirit led?

Business meeting is to help us test our leadings with each other.

Coming to Meeting in the spirit of Love will decrease the impact of strains on working with each other. Having the intention to be in this spirit with understanding and patience will guide us through difficult times. Good social relationships among us can provide richer ground by which to complete our Meeting agenda.

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 was observed that making our relationships deeper depends more on the quality of time we spend with one another rather than the amount of time.

Currently we don't seem to have issues in the meeting that cause tension between differing ideas or opinions. Maintaining relationships with those outside our group requires more effort. We were reminded that we need to view another's point of view as an opportunity to learn something about ourselves.

We understand that Friends as a whole are not free of divisions and conflicts among individuals and different theological branches. We find ourselves guilty of some of the same narrow-mindedness we criticize in others. Most strive to allow others to follow their own paths just as we wish to follow ours, but it is good to be reminded by this query of the ideal.

The phrase in the query —cultivate a forgiving spirit" made one person uneasy as it seems to imply that all that is required is to understand the basis of a conflict rather than dealing with it directly. Again, we are reminded that recognizing that the other may have a portion of the Truth, as do we, can lead to finding a resolution for all. The phrase —give conflict up to God" seems to be an important one to remember in dealing with all disagreements.

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: It is the culture of Friends to be boldly independent. It can be demeaning to older Friends when they do not know how to reach out for help in time of need.

There is a sense, shared by all present, that we don't always do a good job of communicating our personal need for help to others.

Sometimes difficulty in communicating our personal needs is literally due to external communication barriers coming from not being able to hear each other when speaking in meeting. Some time was spent in discussing whether a microphone might be useful if available in meeting for worship and business meeting times. Several friends noted appreciation for having the queries read aloud in meeting for worship and felt that this helps overcome some hearing problems.

One member asked how any of us seek group or one-on-one help.

Another highlighted personal experience of learning the importance of being able to ask others for help, finding that she had been enriched by a "clearness" process where she found the group members to be loving, without a lot of defined rules and barriers. The member shared many times before feeling the need to be "stoic" when wrestling with personal decision. She was surprised at realizing that she had missed some valuable insight and support by trying "to be stoic" and not sharing problems and getting helpful feedback.

A question came forward from the group: Are single people more likely to be "stoic" due to worrying about whether they might be projecting a sense of "weakness"? This was addressed by another, who reminded all present of the Buddhist teaching of "the importance of generosity." Do we prevent others from being generous? We are taught to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Does this teaching not imply compassion for oneself? Not recognizing personal needs could be seen as not being compassionate.

It is the sense of those present that we encourage both men and women to share care giving.

We make a good effort, through Friendly Eights, the Meeting Circle, Ministry and Oversight et al., to draw members of all ages into the fellowship of the meeting. A question was raised again about addressing ability to hear the messages in meeting. We were reminded that being attentive to the energy under the messages in meeting is important. Hearing spiritually depends a lot on being physically, spiritually present while having the necessary accommodations for hearing.

Concern was raised that we still do not have a good handle on how to care for youth and children beyond preschool age in the second hour. A seasoned birthright friend regaled those present with a personal memory of being a young person and getting "tickled and giggly" in meeting and being known as a "bench shaker."

One Friend responded that children contribute entertainment to the meeting. It was roundly affirmed that the children are a very important part of the meeting.

A concern was raised that neither the adults nor the children all know each other's names. It was decided that the meeting would move to develop nametags to address this issue.

The Ministry and Oversight Committee periodically writes letters to those that are at a distance from meeting. The Friendly Line is greatly valued for its communication channels to members and attenders who are in other places and unable to attend regularly.

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: Improved communication among members of the meeting and parents involved in First Day School has increased awareness and involvement in planning for First Day School. The new calendar is helpful. Parents encourage the rest of the meeting to be more aware of what they are doing in First Day School and what we can do to support these activities; for example, awareness of the use of Styrofoam and writing letters to kids in Iran, a project of the Peace Center. Parents struggle against commercialism in raising their children. Parents involved in First Day School have developed excellent programs that encourage inquiring minds and thinking on both sides of an issue. The —Earth Day Birthday," where children give those with a birthday from among the things the giver owns, encourages better use of possessions and recycling.

Ministry and Counsel has developed programs to encourage learning among adults in the meeting; for example, on Quakerism and homelessness; and we are planning one on the environment this spring. The meeting has continued the *Getting to Know You* series which has been successful. We continue to support Scattergood School financially through our yearly meeting apportionment and also through service of members on school committees.

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 feel led to support families and individuals in our meeting in every way we can. Each of us is connected—one with the community of Friends

Our meeting feels like a safe place for young people to learn to speak up and be assertive. It is not always allowed or accepted in the wider world. There is much pressure on kids to be popular and fit in. Here they can be individuals and be liked and accepted for who they are?

Children learn from the modeling of adults. Our lives speak. Sharing life's experiences, struggles, and concerns with our children allows them to see a larger picture of the possibilities in life and helps them develop inner resources. One thing we can do for our younger members is to teach about healthy relationships, which can help prevent violence. Adults should let kids know if they are willing to listen. However, the young person may not always be willing to share. That should be respected. Families and our faith community can't do it all. Sometimes professional help is needed. Not all families are nurturing. Some are in denial about problems and even violence. Intimate interactions within a family teach children what is acceptable, even if it is dysfunctional.

Some homes feel like holy ground, where daily centering in the spirit takes place. These practices become apparent in the home. The connection with spirit is communicated by actions and words.

Our sharing of joys and concerns and visiting while drinking coffee each week after worship are very much appreciated as a way to connect with each other and strengthen our bonds. Any opportunity to join together is an opportunity to nurture our community of Friends.

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: We read and pondered Query 11 on social and economic justice. A member shared his experiences of visiting a young person in prison, and now in a halfway house, and how he sees for himself that the claims of the government about training, social services, and mental health care within the penal system are simply not true. He has seen no evidence of any efforts in these directions. When the political candidates espouse change, as they all are doing, it is not clear whom the change is for, nor whether we might be called on to make sacrifices. The anti-immigration political agenda flies in the face of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:35-36.

Often we are privileged through accidents of birth and upbringing over which we have no control. We recognize that we find it difficult to empathize with people whose lives are so unlike our own. We know that living with people who are different from us helps us understand their reality better. Likewise, we believe we need to exercise our imagination to take in the realities of others' lives. We are aware that the benefits for the participants in work camps is enormous in opening us to how others in the world may live, and are also cautious that we cannot expect the underprivileged to carry the burden of educating the privileged. The work camp

movement was a powerful tool for us, but may be a more limited tool for those whom it has been meant to help.

We are reminded that many people may hate Americans because we do not even know why others hate us. At times, we have difficulty understanding how our behavior affects others. One couple that has traveled to the east by bus commented that they were almost the only white people on the bus at times. Bus travel is a strong indication of classism in our country.

We hope that our belief in that of the Divine existing within all people makes it easier for us to understand another's perspective. Yet we ourselves have not yet been able to agree to marry a gay or lesbian couple. We need to look at ourselves, ask ourselves if we treat everyone equally, before we point fingers at others.

We recognize that it is confusing to be American and to be taught that equality is for all, when at the same time our society expends much energy in perpetuating systematic inequity. Awareness of this discrepancy, and how we are all implicitly living within it, is important to free ourselves to be able to make choices guided by Jesus' words, rather than by society's expectations. We also remind ourselves that the purpose of the queries is to help us live in ways that take us closer to God. A little guilt can motivate us to change, but it is not helpful to respond by spinning our wheels in the depths of guilt. The latter does not promote either thinking or action. We are all right and we can do better.

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 are aware of the deep conflict for many of us as we struggle with the dilemma of paying taxes that support programs that benefit our lives as well as others lives and the large portion that goes for military and to support the death penalty. The issue is very troubling and remains unresolved.

This election year has provided a more open forum for discussing political views. Although we sometimes disagree with another person's views, we try to express our own with love, but are not sure we always do so successfully. So often, political views are expressed with vehemence and surety that one's own are the only correct views, it is difficult not to respond in kind. We are often alarmed at the measures individuals are willing to take in order to feel secure from imagined threats. The loss of personal liberty in the last few years in the name of national security is of great concern.

As we face the changing economic situation in our nation, we are aware of the real dilemma the country faces as a diminishing world power. While we often individually feel powerless to make any kind of significant changes in our government policies, we try to support organizations that address the many complicated issues we are

concerned about. Although concrete results may not be what we quite anticipated, we are reminded that our efforts may bring unexpected benefits.

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: We are encouraged that concern for environmental issues has become more widespread in the society at large. Yet we are troubled that the attempts to address these concerns do not question or attempt to alter the disproportionate use of resources, both as residents of this country and as human beings on the planet.

We are challenged by the advice to give thought and effort to replenishing what we receive from the earth, knowing how short we fall. As one Friend asked, —How can I possibly give back what I receive when what I receive is my very life?

What we give back is profound gratitude for the earth and the joy we experience when we live in harmony with creation. We recognize that a strong emotional connection to the earth is necessary and we work to nurture this in ourselves and others. We hope to mobilize with gratitude rather than guilt.

We seek to live simply and be good stewards of the earth's resources. We go out of our way to grow and prepare our food. We are content with smaller houses and older cars. We recognize that living responsibly does not have to be difficult; it is in fact fun and satisfying.

We look for ways to communicate this to others. We struggle with our dependence on cars. We find it hard to imagine the earth restored unless people stop driving cars. Yet we are unable to do so ourselves, and we ask ourselves, —If Quakers can't stop driving, who can? We hold this concern as we calculate our carbon footprint, and make choices to reduce it. Even small changes, such as driving at or below the speed limit, can make a difference in ways we cannot know.

We seek to remain open to the leading of the spirit as we grow in our awareness of our interconnectedness.

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 are certainly aware of the benefits we derive from our society's exploitation of natural and human resources. We know that problems of pollution and the various problems with immigration are related to the overuse of our resources. We are part of the problem. Most of us live in houses that are too big and thus use too much gas to heat, for example.

We know that we should be doing something about the prison problem in Iowa. One of our members participates in Alternatives to Violence. We need to work with our legislature. They want to build more prisons when we think that it would be more appropriate to imprison fewer people, especially those with minor drug offenses and bad check writing. Rehabilitation programs are more socially uplifting as well as cost effective.

We participate in a host of events in Ames that address social injustice. Our support of Scattergood is a means to foster understanding of these issues. We think that Scattergood School does a lot for both its students and staff in seeing and understanding injustice issues.

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: One of the basic foundations for peacemaking is the recognition of the witness of Truth and goodness in every heart and the acknowledgement of this witness in seeking reconciliation with those with whom we have differences.

We are challenged by the overwhelming forces that create and maintain conflict. If we are open to the leadings of clear thought and the path of Light, we can develop faithful, effective and compassionate alternatives to violence.

Often, the events of the moment lead to feelings of frustration and a call for some to express these motivations in some form of non-violent direct action or civil disobedience. We affirm this path for those who are led, but acknowledge that, as we seek direction in our response to war and violence, the journey for many begins with allowing our Spirits to seek a more loving and holy attitude toward conflict and those whom it affects.