

IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE) 2009 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 seek to walk in the mystic way to find unity with the Eternal and with one another. Our meetings for worship are held in expectant waiting for the leadings of the Holy Spirit. We experience a familiar sense of spiritual presence in our meeting house and a spiritual bond among those present and with our members away.

For many of us worship is seeking to be fully aware of God. We recognize that for each of us, individually, meeting for worship reflects our personal journey, which can include praise, gratitude, and "connection" with the Holy Spirit.

Preparing for worship is a growing process that may begin in the evening of seventh day.

We seek to simplify our lives and thoughts so we come to know the workings of the Holy Spirit within our heart and are better able to hear what it is that God would have us know.

We seek to remove the things that are distraction to our presence with God, to "remove that which is not of God."

Vocal ministry occasionally adds to the experience but seems to have another purpose of connection to the wider community, of minds and hearts in purposeful waiting. We need to recognize spiritual gifts. It seems that we sometimes hide our candle beneath a bushel.

We ponder how worship is useful in our daily lives? The mysteries of life create questions. Answers can be received during meditative silence.

We are frequently challenged to express our experience of silent worship to others, so we seek descriptions and queries that help us share our understanding of the worship process.

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 need to do more intervisitation. Being at another meeting can remind us of what we need to do, give us new ideas, and help us to appreciate our own meeting. Midyear Meeting and Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) are encouraging, as they are great opportunities (to be with Friends).

Sharing our thoughts about Quakerism with others is often easy, as many people are curious about Quakerism. Because we feel genuine and unashamed about our beliefs and because these beliefs are very compatible with other faiths, we can share our beliefs with others easily. Many people today are hungry for the spiritual but are put off by the doctrines that they see in many religions. Our inclusiveness and simplicity are an opening to others. Often it is most important for us to be ready to listen. The diversity we find in our Meeting creates a space for us to interface with people from other backgrounds. Our belief that there is that of God in everyone helps us to listen to each person.

We need to listen attentively and respond honestly, without aggression. Finding common ground creates openings to reach out to those with whom we disagree.

By trying to live by the Quaker testimonies we make our presence known, if quietly.

Our way of worship is designed to encourage inclusiveness. We often find that we do have trouble with socioeconomic and educational class differences.

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 has become short, sweet, and routine, with no controversy or need for much discussion often. No active committees set this stage. The last large controversy we addressed resulted in losing a few attendees.

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 discussion began with silence.

Learning to respect each other's opinions is a long step towards harmony. We do not always have to think the same way on an issue.

We feel that men and women share equally in the work of our meeting. Jobs are undertaken irrespective of gender.

A member stopped attending during the last year. Disagreement had occurred because of her daughter's experience at Scattergood School. Some of us have kept in touch with the family and hopefully this break will mend.

Appreciation of an opponent is very different from an automatic kindness.

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: In opening the discussion of this query, we considered whether our meeting is a community or merely a collection of good individuals who gather weekly for worship. In reflecting on this question, we concluded that we are a community with substance, which continues in the face of loss of members through death or members moving away. In maintaining this community, we noted the interesting contrast we encounter every First Day. As Friends, we are a community, which practices silent worship. But, it is the sharing time after meeting that also keeps us connected and helps us form community. This time after meeting for worship is valuable and needs to be supported and nurtured.

Although we acknowledge the importance of sharing, we often find it difficult to share pain or ask for help from other meeting members. Sharing joy comes more easily and seems more natural. While sharing pain is challenging, it is through this sharing that members of the meeting come to help one another. Being able to help other members in times of need allows our community to strengthen and brings a sense of balance to our spiritual lives.

We have appreciated the help that members of our meeting community have provided to others who have had difficulty joining us in silent worship because of transportation problems. This has allowed long standing members of our community to continue to join us on First Day. In addition to helping each other as individuals, the community of a meeting is also a source of strength, which allows a meeting to work through and deal with difficult problems. While the small size of many meetings means that all are needed to step forward to help solve meeting problems, the small size also contributes to the willingness of members to support one another as we work together to solve problems.

Reflecting on the phrase in the query focusing on the importance that gender not be a limitation in providing help and support to others, we acknowledged that our culture offers contrasting stereotypes for men and women. It is often suggested that men should be independent, stoic, and should not need help. As a result, men may have more difficulty asking for help or providing help to other members of our community. In addition to gender differences, we considered the complexity of all social groups. Within a group, we often find smaller circles of people who are more connected to each other and more informed about each other. Others remain less well connected, either by deliberate choice or by circumstance, and find it difficult to participate in giving and receiving care.

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: One member mentioned the book *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin concerning building schools for girls in Afghanistan. We are considering having a discussion of this book for our meeting. Everyone has the divine spark, but ignorance is an underlying problem. Extremist groups impose beliefs and contribute to a lot of violence in our world.

Because of our location in a university town, we assume members are committed to education and lifelong learning. The First Day School Education Committee is working to integrate the meeting with the children's education program.

Recently there have been fewer activities for adult education. A program on basics of Quaker beliefs, traditions, and history needs to be provided again. It has been two or more years since we provided it. Presentations on potluck days have covered a variety of topics related to our values. A potluck presentation on history of the Iowa City Meeting would be a good idea. We plan to ask one of our members if she would be willing to plan that one, maybe in the fall to inform new attenders when school starts again.

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: Friends noted the importance of committing time to be together. Listening to each other, enjoying each other's company and encouraging each individual to grow in the Light are most important. In one Friend's experience, family life was rarely tranquil. It was important to accept that there will be disagreements and frictions between those who know each other well. Learning to be respectful and respond lovingly to those with whom we disagree, truly begins at home.

After first congratulating ourselves on our gender neutrality, Friends came to agree that we do maintain deep cultural gender expectations. We are pleased to note that young Friends seem more at ease with nontraditional male/female roles than we were at their age.

Truly listening to each other is key to effective communication. Storytelling is a simple, effective way to communicate our joys and struggles. We all have favorite family stories which speak to who we are and illustrate complex life lessons.

We have many opportunities in our community for meditation and social action, which allow us to put our principles to work. Taking the time to center, to listen to our hearts and the Divine inform our lives and our opinions. Taking action, engaging the world, enlightening society with our own small piece of the Light, deepens our understanding and experience.

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: The Advice and the Query give a daunting picture of an austere life which seems too much for us to live up to. We need to find a balance between the negative and positive responses to the query. We know that the testimony of simplicity sometimes can be a distraction when we interact with our neighbors. We find that the Meeting does help us to focus on the issues of the query. Our lives are too cluttered, with material things certainly, but more importantly in our use of time. We recognize that speaking only the truth is a privilege that some may not enjoy. We do keep to the testimony of integrity by not saluting the flag, or standing for the national anthem.

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: Because we sometimes cannot support the actions of our government, we make a strong effort to work for issues we can support in our nation, state, and community. The recent pervasive atmosphere of violence, fear, and misrepresentation is destructive to learning to work together for solutions to our many urgent problems. The seemingly everlasting election process is cause for much alienation and distrust. We feel we work hard to support good candidates and we often contact and thank our elected congressional representatives when we approve their work. We also contact them when we don't.

We are greatly concerned about the overcrowding and unjust sentences in our prisons. Several of our members work for the Alternatives to Violence program in the prisons. We support several Quaker organizations working for a just and fair society, so that many who are powerless and ill-treated will not resort to violence and hopelessness.

One of our members is concerned about plans in the Dexter Community to put up a statue and commemorate a violent period in their history when the Barrows Gang hid out near there. He had the courage to speak out, but felt his views were not accepted.

While it is important to share our convictions, listening carefully to others is key to resolving conflicts. Others might have a better way.

We all have different talents and different gifts to work for a better community, nation, and world. If we are tender hearted, loving and sincerely seeking Divine Guidance the right path will be more clearly laid out before us.

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 is very concerned about our responsibility to our environment. We want to support the life around us that is also so much a part of ourselves.

Our monthly reading group has been studying —Environmental Economics" with essays by John Woolman, Kenneth Boulding, Marshall Massey and others. Frequently awareness can make a difference in the choices we make to live responsibly. At our open house one member gave a tour to share knowledge about the —green building" that now houses our meeting. Making choices to improve energy efficiency is important and we should weigh the cost of efficiency against how much we value our planet.

It is important for us to take responsibility for the choices we make. We recognize that by decreasing our use of fossil fuels we can live more simply and in harmony with creation. Our meeting has endorsed the Earth Charter, implemented a True Cost of Travel program, and done many other things with regard to environmental issues. Still we recognize that it is hard to be as responsible as we need to be, and continue to be a part of the greater society. It seems that the only way to be responsible about our use of energy would be to renounce use of fossil fuels and live apart from society.

It is hard to find answers for the deep questions that we feel we must answer, and sometimes awareness and information come to us in paradoxical ways. For example, the television often has excellent programs on environmental issues. Even as we meet here in a brick building which sits on a concrete parking lot, we can hear birds singing and notice the tracking of the sun across the sky. Perhaps Malvina Reynolds' song, about the inevitability of grass growing up through sidewalks, can give us a measure of hope: God Bless the Grass!

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 aware of how we benefit by simply living in this country compared to other places in the world. It seems that anything that brings comfort and ease to our living experiences seems to come at the expense of someone else. We share a feeling of being locked into some of the exploitive systems just because of where we live, e.g. no public transportation readily available and lack of services in our immediate area. Many of us try to support groups that are intimately involved in addressing some of the social problems of the world and the environment.

We are also aware that our current economic climate has produced many instances of heartache because of foreclosures and rising unemployment. As difficult as these situations are for those directly affected, these difficulties have produced some innovative programs ideas and solutions that may bring about more significant changes which is encouraging.

Our concerns for the conditions in our prisons today such as treating mental illness as a crime, mandatory sentences for non-violent crimes, etc. are hard to address on an individual basis. Some of us provide support to various organizations such as Alternatives to Violence Program that are working to change the system. Some also maintain contact with friends and family members who are incarcerated. Being living examples of the belief that all individuals have value is all some of us can do.

The complications that drive people to violence are impossible for most of us to comprehend and to address in any meaningful way. We are reminded that —we are not called to be successful, but to be faithful.

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: We try to keep informed on important issues through various sources, especially beyond mainstream media presentations. However, we can never be certain that the information we gather provides the complete picture. Cultural differences color our own personal view of national and world affairs.

Addressing domestic violence in a direct way is not easy. We support the local Women's and Children's shelter with contributions both on a personal level and through Sewing Bee funds. Having information available about local services and providing it when we sense a need is also important, but is not something we have done very effectively. It is especially difficult to accept that there may be violent situations within our own families that need to be addressed. Those who have tried to approach a situation often feel ineffective and helpless.

At one time in the wider local community, addressing peace issues was identified as just a Quaker issue, but that is no longer true. In some instances, being identified as belonging to a peace organization brings resentment. We try to respond to such situations with tact and sensitiveness. Unfortunately we also can resort to similar stereotyping and attitudes of —us versus them especially with those who share our concerns. We try to support peace and justice organizations with our donations although that often feels like an easy response when more direct action is needed. We were reminded by one person that just being involved with our local communities and families contributes to addressing larger issues.

Many commented that it seems easier to talk about gender issues now than in the past. However that does not necessarily mean these issues have been addressed effectively. We recognize that basically little has changed in society's attitude as a whole.