

## **IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE) 2011 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 try to prepare for worship with quiet activities or stillness, even when our family lives don't always make it easy. Drinking coffee and reading the paper can be part of our preparation. We can also consider First Day a traditional Sabbath by taking care of practical chores ahead, so we're not distracted by everyday duties.

We thought that Quakers no longer needed to grapple with the gender of the divine, but in fact it is an old issue that is so deep in traditional religion that it continues to haunt us. For many of us the proliferation of good writing on feminist spirituality that flourished in the 80's was an essential step; as we found biblical and other references to the feminine side of God, we could break away from the patriarchal view. Now in places like our meeting chances abound for us to hear new metaphors from each other. We are skeptical of putting God into any box, but since "God" cannot be described in words,

metaphors are necessary and may be mistaken for boxes. We may interpret these through our own lenses; for example, the idea of God as parent may seem repressive to one person but to another it may be a softer term than God as judge. We can have fun with common metaphors for the divine, looking at them in new ways.

For a surprising number of us, doing routine chores with a background of religious or other music can become a kind of worship. Short moments of meditation before a hectic activity or before meals are effective as well. Others aspire to longer periods of meditation.

We carry with us from meeting for worship a piece of the divine that we may have experienced there. As a native American said to John Woolman, whose words he did not understand, "I love to feel the place where words come from." Our actions or words, "right speech" to the Buddhists, when they come from the place of silence we have experienced in worship, speak of our values. We are bringing into our daily lives the heightened awareness that we have experienced together.

## **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 immediate response to what we do to share the message of Friends in the larger community is “not enough.” Then we considered some of the ways we reach out to the community.

We recently co-sponsored a book discussion on *What’s Right With Islam Is What’s Right With America* at the public library. Every April 15, we make a Tax Day witness at the downtown post office. As with our concern about navigating around Ames safely on foot and bicycle throughout the year, we voice our concerns to elected officials and in the newspaper. We contribute money to a number of local organizations, including the Emergency Residence Project, the Assault Care Center, and Good Neighbor. Nationally, we support AFSC and FCNL.

It is easier to share the fruits of our faith rather than the roots. Sometimes speaking the truth offends people, but it is still important to speak our truth, even as we know what seems true for us is not what seems true for everyone. It helps if we can find some point of agreement and build on that.

No, we are probably not welcoming to people of all creeds. People with some belief systems would probably not be comfortable in our midst. Quakers can get into trouble trying to be accepting of everything. We can be wishy-washy, indirect and false. Someone with beliefs opposite to Quaker testimonies may still be a good person, even though they might not be happy in meeting. Not everyone is willing to worship with us.

It is possible to love people without agreeing with them.

We may be too literate for people who do not read. What if all our books were destroyed? Would our actions speak our faith? Does the faith we live mirror the words we write about ourselves?

It is a gift of the spirit to see God in everyone. We can always pray for people—anyone and everyone.

### **3. MEETING FOR BUSINESS**

**Query:** *How can we hold our meeting 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:** Because we are a small meeting, we don't seem to suffer under the pressure of time. We are able to spend time following meeting for worship and before meeting for business as a social time and then following meeting for business, we again have a time to relate to one another without feeling frustrated by differences of opinion. We strive to attend meeting for business with the same openness we approach meeting for worship. Part of our responsibility lies in just attending the meeting for business.

Discerning clerks are a great help in bringing out the sense of the meeting and the individual feelings. This discernment helps the process of making decisions and the smooth running of the meeting from being so laborious. It is the duty of clerks to bring forth issues and encouraging discussion on what we should do

about them. Sometimes problems don't come to the surface until they are a significant problem.

Do we have problems? Do topics come up that cause division? Of course, and it is always easy to find wedge issues. Topics on which we have not easily found consensus include where we are meeting, abortion, homosexual and transgender issues. A sense of respect for each individual's views is demonstrated in the meeting by the fact that we don't actively avoid wedge topics. When someone differs from the rest, often an offer to stand aside is put forward. Individuals should respect the fact that they are getting out of the way of the group and continue to respect the individual and their differing ideas or leanings, while acknowledging their willingness to set aside their wants.

In a couple of weeks we are planning to discuss where we are going as a meeting. Everyone has a piece of the truth and they are not all necessarily the same. Our piece leads our individual actions toward the whole. We need to use each person's strengths as we slip into our roles. We tend to act as a family or a small rural meeting rather than a meeting in a size more typical to a larger metropolitan area.

In Yearly Meeting for Business it is often harder to attain these concepts, as it is a much bigger meeting.

#### **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 need for individual time with each other is important to the “harmony” of a meeting. Carpooling is not only good for the environment, but to achieve the one-on-one time for talking and listening.

There was a discussion of late arrivals at Meetings for Worship, which are common, and disruptive to some people. We could ask latecomers to enter through the kitchen door and then enter quietly and enter as a group, say 10–15 minutes into the meeting. We suggest that this be an item for discussion at meeting for business.

## **5. MUTUAL CARE**

**Query:** *How do we respond to each other’s personal needs and difficulties in sensitive and useful ways? Do we encourage both men and women to share in care giving?*

*What are we doing to welcome and draw members and attenders of all ages into the fellowship of the meeting?*

*How do we help our children feel the loving care of the meeting? What do the children contribute to the meeting?*

*How do we keep in touch with inactive and distant members and attenders?*

**Selected Response:** We have a core group of regular attenders who know each other well and often share each other’s concerns, burdens, and joys. We are not sure we do well

at following up with visitors and occasional attenders, perhaps feeling that some visitors want to be anonymous.

Even for visitors who do not want to bare their souls it might be important that we share more with them, especially about what goes on in the silence. Our sharing time at the end of the worship hour is a good opportunity for this, and reading the book *Listening Spirituality* is helping us to be more conscious of our spiritual practices, and perhaps more able to share. We are reminded that we can be led to a “teaching ministry” which can be helpful to members and visitors alike. For some of us, expressing the spiritual life in words is very important, and for others worship is a distinctly non-verbal activity.

We keep ourselves busy and don’t always leave space in our lives to follow God’s leadings, including the basic one: to love each other.

## **6. EDUCATION**

**Query:** *How can we most effectively foster a spirit of inquiry and a loving and understanding attitude toward life?*

*What effort are we making to become better acquainted with the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, our Judeo-Christian heritage, the history and principles of Friends, and the contributions of other religions and philosophies to our spiritual heritage?*

*In what ways can we encourage an educational process that is consistent with the values Friends cherish? How do gender based expectations affect the goals we set and the way we learn?*

*Do we take an active and supportive interest in schools, libraries and other educational resources in our communities and elsewhere?*

*How do we prepare ourselves and our children to play active roles in a changing world?*

**Selected Response:** We see evidence in our younger people that both a spirit of inquiry and a loving and understanding attitude toward life have been nurtured. In lives of service to family and community and in continuing commitment to Quakerism we see this playing out and we celebrate. Probably the best way we can nurture these qualities is to model them in our own lives.

In Omaha Meeting many are directly involved in education as teachers and in Lincoln Meeting a number are retired teachers and a few facilitate AVP. Two in Lincoln Meeting are on the Scattergood School Committee, so in some ways can affect education. However, others of us have concerns about the direction public education is taking in the country, and, not being directly involved, do not see how we can do anything to redirect it. We see public education as fostering competition and compliance rather than inquiry and caring. We are concerned that we in the U. S. are so self-centered about our country that we cannot see ourselves as we truly are, continuing to believe that we are leaders in science, medicine, and ethical behavior, when in fact we are not. It was noted that in Lincoln we do have a good school board which needs support as it challenges the direction the nation is taking.

We know that we are not preparing ourselves for a changing world when we complain about how things are not as they were in the old days. It seems that in the present time there is too much information and not enough reflection. We ask ourselves, what would it mean for me to prepare myself for an active role in a changing world?

While we recognize that education in many ways, helps us know how to live better lives, there may be too much reliance in our culture on formal education and degrees of various kinds. We



need to respect different kinds of education—that learned by the people who went before

us and that gained in reading or personal experience. We need to approach a new situation with a sense of both what can I teach or share and what can I learn? We can often learn from those without formal education. We need one another and we need to listen carefully to those who have something to say. We could learn much from our own library.

How do we foster a spirit of loving inquiry? The Mandan people would put things where people would see them. Some put themselves and their children where they can see things of interest. A guest once told our meeting that the way to get students involved in inquiry is through a trusting relationship with a teacher; a trusting relationship is the starting point. We have to make opportunities available and not insist that we know the answers. We continue to learn throughout our lives. Of utmost importance, we agree, is to be our best selves.

## **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:** Although we usually think of a family as a group of people living together, we are reminded that in many ways our meeting is much like a family. We are struck by the second paragraph of the Advice, being aware that this description can also apply to our meeting community: “A family, whatever its composition, is a unique and sometimes fragile bonding of people. At its best, it is concerned with the welfare of the whole and each of its constituents.” Many in our meeting have their actual biological families living far away, yet still we care about their well being as much as family members whom we see every day.

One member expressed appreciation that in her Scattergood family there are scheduled times for silence and meditation. The expectation is that everyone in the school community participates, and this provides a needed incentive and structure for moments of quiet that could easily be crowded out by a busy schedule.

This sentiment was echoed by another member, who described a daily routine including scheduled times for silence and for communica-

tion. Meals can be an important time of sharing as well. Sometimes it is helpful to set aside a regular hour to discuss issues that arise and need mutual consideration.

In a family system, division of daily chores is essential, and family members usually find themselves playing particular roles of behavior and responsibility. As long as we are sensitive to individual needs and skills when choosing these roles, we feel that roles need not be eliminated and can be healthy and useful.

Keeping open lines of communication and giving conscious attention to the needs of the family as a whole and its individual

members helps promote health and happiness in the family system. We know how easy it is to let these lines of communication close, that it takes effort and commitment to keep communication flowing. Yet it is worth the effort, for once closed, lines of communication are hard to re-open, and issues left unattended can result in future feelings of guilt and remorse.

On the lighter side, a sense of humor can be an important addition to family life. Having fun together, enjoying special meals and going out to movies or other entertainment can be a vital component to a healthy family.

## **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:** A number of us feel that our lives are too cluttered with things and with activities. We recognize simplicity as a worthwhile goal but find it is a challenge to achieve. Perhaps

some of our attachment to “things” comes from a lack of trust that our needs will be met. What constitutes clutter may be different for each of us at different times of our lives. As our physical circumstances change, our needs can also change. Experience and trust can be good partners. Sometimes tending to something one cares about can be misinterpreted as clutter.

Limiting the amount of space devoted to a particular type of “thing” can be useful in reducing clutter. A small but carefully selected amount of something can sometimes say more about someone than a large collection. Perhaps in our Reading Group we could explore this subject further.

A daily spiritual practice could be helpful, but is not always easy to maintain.

## **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 recognize the efforts of groups that represent similar values such as FCNL, AFSC, AVP, Iowa Peace

Network, and Citizens for Community Improvement, and a local crisis intervention and advocacy center. We can encourage those who advocate for fairness and justice.

Friends feel it is important to share our concerns with those who are involved in making decisions about policy. We must carefully consider how to best speak truth to power, to not unduly offend our governmental representatives, yet to make clear to them if we have deep concerns about their positions on issues. As individuals we try to stay aware of local and global issues and be involved as we are called by the Spirit. We seek to be mindful of the Divine spirit within everyone.

## **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 discussed the various recycling programs available in our area and also shared the small ways we are trying to be good stewards of the earth. We also discussed the tradeoffs of buying locally grown food that may mean a trip to a town that is farther removed than buying from our local food market. It is discouraging to feel that in spite of our concern for the environment, nothing we do seems to make much of a difference.

The comment was made that we as a nation need to shift our thinking that growth is the answer to our economic problems and shift to a more sustainable pattern of living. We are also aware that population growth is at the core of many of our problems.

We recognize it is a balancing act between what we do practically and staying true to our spiritual concerns. We are aware of the violence that is prevalent in our relationships with the rest of creation, but aside from being conscious of changing our own patterns of living as best we can, our efforts seem minimal. We do try to nurture and respect life around us.

## **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:** It is obvious to most of us that we are both beneficiaries and victims of our current economic and governmental systems. Ways we can address this situation directly are less clear.

Three members are involved with the Alternatives to Violence Program in South Dakota and Iowa. In listening to

their examples of their interactions with those in the prison facilities we are kept current on the results coming from this program. It is inspiring to hear of these examples of the life of the Spirit awakening in people who are

incarcerated. Through their sharing plus those of educators in today's school systems we have been given a glimpse into what drives people to violence. We are thankful that there are programs like AVP that directly address the prevailing violence which seems inherent in our society today.

We try to speak out against prejudice against minority groups, but do not feel very effective when one comes across blatant statements. For example, how does one respond while visiting with an eighty-five-year-old neighbor with only an eighth-grade education who casually uses the "n" word when talking about our President. Turning such a statement into a question back to the person is good advice but difficult to follow in such instances.

We feel our support for Scattergood Friends School and the social awareness and concern it fosters in its students is one indirect way we help make our society into one that values everyone for who they are.

## **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:** Discussion started with viewing nonviolence as avoidance of conflict. There may be a stereotype of Friends avoiding conflict as a form of nonviolence. The group acknowledged that conflict has the ability to bring people together. But how do we turn conflict of ideas into a positive thing?

A question was raised “How do you progress to dealing with conflict without a ‘winner/loser’ outcome?” It was pointed out that not all discussions of conflicting opinions or ideas need to be an engagement. If you differ, you can simply comment, “I see things differently” and let it go at that. It was pointed out that there are currently forums for training in civility and dealing with conflict available to us. Example: several had heard Jim Leach speak this past Friday regarding civility. This is the first of a series of trainings in Des Moines as part of the Character Counts. The discussion did identify a desire to avoid fueling anger with opposing conflicting thoughts and the complication when egos become involved. However, acknowledging difference without challenge can be done. Peace and harmony can be attained even with conflicting stands when the fact that there will be differences can be accepted.

Words can cause violence when misunderstood or said carelessly without intent to harm. This can be a daily practice to use words carefully so as not to cause violence.

It was pointed out that our meeting does not look for areas of conflict. As silence is a part of the meeting process, there may be



a feeling that we respond to conflict with silence. Is that good? We also discussed silence vs. honesty. When is it better to respond to a conflicting statement voiced by someone with silence? Are we being honest with that person? Discussion included timing and coming back to a statement you do not agree with at a time when the environment may be better for discussion by both parties. It was also noted that healing is not the same as fixing. Healing comes from within and we all have the ability to heal.

It was felt that our culture may be conditioning us to violence by viewing violent television or films, by the use of machines of war in our national pageantry/celebration (military aircraft flyovers, for example), etc.

The power of "language of reconciliation" was also noted as a tremendous tool to defuse violence, as in South Africa.

We can look at our consumption habits and ways that we can project our belief in nonviolence. As George Fox said, "(We) seek to live in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars."

It was also noted that as human beings we are capable of many emotions and actions. In some areas, it is believed that the human being is "hard wired" to do things to survive, from revenge to nurturing. The complete human being knows when it is necessary to be aggressive and when to be passive. It is the appropriateness of the action at the given time that is important.

The group acknowledged that Quakers can seem to be invisible, perhaps due to some of our tenets not to evangelize our beliefs. Early Quakers were not so much that way. The early Quakers acted on their beliefs and were persecuted for it often with jail or death. Times have changed. We tend to work to get our message out quietly.

Summary: "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."