

IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE)
2012 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 feel the presence of Quakers who have passed on as we worship together and read their words. During meeting for worship we are able to tune in to the spirit and in this way learn to hear the leadings we are given. This helps us shape our lives and find clarity for our purpose. We feel a sense of duty to our family members and the larger world to follow these leadings. Many times they involve change that is not easy for anyone involved. Meeting for worship helps us find the power in ourselves to do what needs to be done. All who attend meeting for worship regularly seem to integrate it into their daily lives. We can't help but be changed by the presence of the spirit. We are blessed when someone is moved to speak. Vocal ministry does contribute to the spiritual life of the meeting and gives us a chance to enlarge our discussions as it furthers our growth. Being faithful to our leadings to speak teaches us to express ourselves truthfully in other areas of life. Our meeting is strengthened by our gifts as long as we are faithful to what we've been given.

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: As we contemplate the condition of our meeting, we are mindful of the aspects that contribute to seekers feeling comfortable with us on their spiritual journey. We continue to search for ways to involve others to share with our physical and spiritual abundance. We question what it is about our testimonies and our implicit theology that might be a hindrance to acceptance within our community. We discussed how to overcome some of the myths that might abound about Quakers. Suggestions to expand our circle have included a movie night, a book club and an arts festival. These ideas come with a recognition of our limited numbers, energy and resources, but with a willingness to pursue these endeavors with a generous and accepting spirit.

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: We appreciate the advice which emphasizes the seriousness of Meeting for Business. We noted that the queries seem to be philosophical rather than practical. If there is philosophical unity will the practical fall into place? Our meetings for business can be unfocused, and we go off on tangents. We appreciate receiving an agenda in advance of the meeting so that we know what is our business for the meeting. More silence, especially holding the clerk in silence while minutes are being written, would be helpful. Silence is about going slow and working out how to deal with our lives. One of the purposes of meeting for business is to create community. When we get off track it is out of hunger to relate to one another. We create community by finding unity together about the things which need to be done, our business.

We are respectful of differences of opinion. One Friend remembered an experience of having a strong disagreement with meeting: “The meeting handled it so liberally and patiently that I felt I could let go. I learned something about not pushing. People can be on different sides without being wrong. I felt the gift of being part of a community.” We find that people step up to do what needs doing; it happens organically. We are fortunate to have a clerk who is serious about her service.

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 question of harmony brought to mind a member who has not attended for a few years and whether the disharmony of that time contributed to the situation. As a meeting we feel we have become more harmonious in the past few years, and not by keeping our opinions to ourselves. We take more time to share about life events, books, conferences, our jobs – and about how these are shaping our spiritual lives. This sharing has increased our trust in each other, which in turn encourages more sharing. Though it is informal, the sharing really helps us deepen our relationships and examine our actions and opportunities from a spiritual point of view. Some of our best communication happens during after-worship discussions, especially when we did Bible study which offered chances to explore and voice our personal theologies. There are topics we don't agree on and don't discuss often, such as salvation, resurrection, reincarnation, gay rights, abortion, sex, and extra-terrestrial life. We feel that because we do trust one another, we can and should take more time to talk about these issues. After all, we come together to worship because we believe our corporate discernment of God is more reliable than individual efforts. We believe we help each other to increase the "measure of Light" that is given to us. The meeting is one of the legs of the stool of our understanding of God. If we are not asking the meeting to help us understand really difficult questions, then we are missing that leg and our stool will be wobbly at best.

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 try to be present to one another in order to create an atmosphere in which friends feel free to share personal needs. However, our heritage is to avoid being intrusive in others' lives and we often wait to be asked before responding in any way. This can lead others to feel their needs will not be addressed. Ministry and Counsel Committee often seems too formal a structure to provide the intimate connection that is needed. At the same time we often find it difficult to be open when we do have needs ourselves. Gathering casually in small groups often gives an opportunity to share in an easier, less formal atmosphere, e.g. working around the quilt, mowing lawn and doing other housekeeping chores together. Absentee members are contacted by the Ministry and Counsel Committee with a letter of greeting, usually about every two years, and sometimes we have received responses from these. Unfortunately we have lost addresses for some former members. Our attempts to let others know who and what we are and that we welcome all to join us have been rather casual. In spite of this, individuals continue to find us either through the internet or our listing in the local newspapers. There are currently only two very young children in the meeting. These two are definitely cherished and welcomed to the meeting whenever they are with us as are others who come occasionally.

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: With no dogma or creed, Quakers tend to naturally foster a sense of inquiry and attempt to resolve conflict in a loving manner. Listening is key. Children in the meeting are exposed to Bible study, study of other religious traditions, and Quaker education, although it is a challenge to plan for the small number, with irregular attendance. Friends appreciate the value of formal Quaker education and its impact beyond just Quaker families. Friends recognize the desire for adults to also engage in Quaker education.

Friends are aware that we continue to struggle with gender-based expectations and that we need to be vigilant in this respect. It is important to stay involved and play active roles in our schools, libraries, and other institutions in the community. We should seek to stay well informed about our communities. We prepare our children to live in a changing world primarily by our example.

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: Family roles of every generation are important. We believe that the roles we play as parents and members of all families follow the lead of our parents and those of the previous generation. Often the day-to-day necessities of earning a living and providing a safe and wholesome environment for our families are lessened or eased as we become older. This freedom from worry and responsibility is a blessing that allows the older generation to lead lives that exemplify the love of life and gratitude for the blessing we have been given. This valuable role shows hope to the next generation. Our homes are not only vitally important to our immediate family, but can also enable us to reach beyond our own family to meaningfully communicate with others. When we invite people into our homes we interact on a more personal basis. These friendships are crucial to long term success within a community.

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: Part of the discussion mentioned how we can be mindful of Quaker values in our daily lives, using discretion in our choices of entertainment, topics of discussion with friends and family, finding escapes from routines that provide joy and beauty in our lives, rather than allowing distractions to personal spiritual growth. Balance seems to be important, though often not easy to maintain. Discussion of this query then turned to how we deal with addictions and mental illness and the ways families are affected. The stigmas that are still attached to sharing this information make it difficult to include in open discussion, but we are aware that we must seek ways to recognize this gap in our caring concerns and open ourselves to correcting it, both within our small groups, in the area-wide paucity of options for care, and in statewide reform of the system. Perhaps this will be a topic for further discussion later in the year.

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 sometimes feel so at odds with our government that we don't know how to begin. We can't understand why "they" talk and act as they do and we don't have confidence in what they tell us. Society seems to be set up so that hard work and integrity are not rewarded, and it is difficult to believe that our leaders are acting in faith even when they claim that they are religious. Our feelings of confusion and powerlessness, along with the disrespectful and unpleasant tone of the public discussion discourage us from participating at all. However, we believe that living in the Light requires that we speak and act with integrity, which means that instead of withdrawing from this bewildering world we must try to respond to it in Truth. We must try to act based on what is right whether or not we calculate that it will be effective. We feel we need to work harder to check our leadings and strengthen our actions through worship. Real communication seems more possible at the local level, where we can meet face-to-face and know elected officials over time. Part of acting right is remembering that politicians and bureaucrats are people, with both goodness and weakness. They invest a lot in understanding issues and developing relationships, which can make it hard for them to stay clear in their purpose. God may lead us to help them do that. We were reminded that we are also people, and while no one taking part in our discussion had sought public office, all work for government at some level. God might be leading us to bring our faith more clearly into our own work, perhaps by taking a stand even though confrontation can be unpleasant.

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: If education about our interdependence were offered from the very beginning, we would grow up with more sense of interconnection. One member put the experience of communion in a new light. When we eat – “this is my body, my blood” – we recognize that this food is connected to us. The food we eat is our body; the liquid we drink is our blood. This perspective opens the door for thinking about interconnection and looking beyond self-interest. . . .The connection between materialism, environment and spirituality makes one think of John Woolman’s observation about the true interconnectedness of everything, and how the growing materialism of the culture of his day was causing people to be cut off from the Spirit. This is the insight that underlay his fight against slavery. Material desires cut you off from the Spirit; this allows you to treat the environment or fellow beings as if they were not part of you. The challenge is how to extricate ourselves from this. . . .

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: Two facets of social and economic justice with which we contend are the societal/political and our own attitudes. Many of our problems are due to our economic system which is based on inequality. Whole groups can be led to disrespect and treat others inhumanely. Prisoners and the mentally ill population are particularly susceptible to this. Addressing the symptoms requires addressing the system. This is the basis for much of the activism in which Friends have engaged over the years. But we must take care not to put all the blame outside ourselves. We must look at how we treat each other. How can we get past our internalized disrespect and acknowledge the humanity in our neighbors on a daily basis? Differences can sometimes be viewed as “interesting” when viewed in Divine Light. Daily prayer and meditation are important in keeping this clarity. We deal with these issues in personal ways, pursuing our own social actions and supporting each other. But what’s next? What would we find if we asked, “What is God asking us to do, as a meeting?”

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: Some of our members are active in the Peace Center in Iowa City, which has an important presence in the area. One member had recently read Michael Klare's *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet*. The world's dependence on petroleum has led to countries maneuvering militarily to obtain oil and gas. The world's remaining oil supply is in unfriendly, dangerous countries. His fear is that it may be a very traumatic world for the next 50 years. Another book mentioned was Eric Fromm's *The Art of Loving*. Care, respect and knowledge are important in relationships with others. Trying to address national and international problems seems overwhelming, but the idea of starting with oneself and then widening the circle into small spheres can have an impact in trying to effect non-violence and peace. We need to address things in our homes, within our families, and our communities. The art of loving needs to begin with our own inner peace. . . . We can't work for peace in our communities and the world if we don't have inner peace.