

IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE) **2014 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: Friends agreed that the best preparation for Meeting for Worship is twofold: a period of silence on the way to meeting or before, and a few minutes of fellowship on arriving at the meeting house. How we refer to what some may call God depends on our own histories and associations. We use gender as it is relevant and appropriate to us; most of us would not be uncomfortable with terms such as “Spirit,” “Mother/Father God,” or many others. It might make us more comfortable, expressing ourselves in worship, if we worried less about others’ connotations behind the terms we use and trusted more that they would accept our terms as being significant to us.

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: The process of discernment for considering outreach presents us with several paths and opportunities. We are mindful of our smallness as we meet every First Day, but realize that our spiritual community and belongingness extends beyond the physical boundaries of our Meeting for Worship. Several members are considered “Active Participating Members at a Distance.” Suggestions have risen up to further their involvement. Possibilities include holding in the Light individuals in the monthly meeting specifically on First Day worship, centering for worship at the same time, and contributing to the query process with personal responses. As we examine the use of different technologies to further the inclusion of distant members, we strive to balance the unique aspects of our Quaker worship, such as silence, worshipful waiting, and spoken leadings of the Spirit, with the changing landscape of culture and technological advancement.

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: A period of silence is necessary to be able to hear what it is that God intends. Stopping to center helps to hold meeting in a spirit of love, understanding, and patient search for clarity and truth while we attend to business. Having personal relationships with others in meeting helps us to uphold that spirit of love. Our meetings for business have become simple and direct. The purpose of business meeting seems to be merely financial discussion and planning the next month, but perhaps also encouraging us to avoid extra work.

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: We do things together and come together often – both in connection with meeting and outside of meeting. We call on each other for help. We trust each other. We disagree on many things – theologically, politically, spiritually -- but it doesn't seem to separate us, at least those who continue coming. There is unequal division of labor in holding the meeting together. We are aware of it. Different people step up and step back in ways that ameliorate this, but the fact of inequality remains. It is unrealistic to expect perfect equality. As far as gender differences, there is nothing overt in what we do. Women weed the grounds; men wash dishes. But women have a certain presence and we approach them with certain feelings and expectations that are different from those of men. It is subtle but real.

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: Considering ourselves a family of believers, we are aware that family members have many different viewpoints or practices for carrying out beliefs, though we remain supportive of each other and respectful of differences, even when disagreements may occur. Living in a college community means we have a fairly transient attendance at meetings for worship, though many short-time attenders do become active in all aspects of meeting. We find that the brochure describing our meeting is helpful for first-time or one-time worshippers. The website has also brought some contacts we might have missed. We still have a message on the answering machine to direct callers. One member remarked that it is meaningful that in our meeting we are not afraid to talk about difficult topics that some of our group face and seek to be aware of events that make for tough times so that we may share highs and lows with each other. The Earthcare group and the newly begun worship sharing provide opportunities to enlarge our understanding and appreciation for the wider Quaker community in our region. We find new strengths in our mutual tenets, though our practices vary.

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: Parents always have concerns about how best to prepare our children to go forth into the future with faith, though we don't know what the future will bring as we look at our changing world, or, hopefully, to effect meaningful changes. We become concerned that the schools are teaching kids how to take tests, or how to look good on tests so the teachers' evaluations will be better! The Quaker attitude, traditionally, has always been that teaching students to pursue answers to

pertinent questions is better than giving them answers. One parent/teacher mentioned that it is the children who are preparing us for whatever the future holds! And the electronic age sometimes takes over how we learn and how we use what we learn, especially in the connections we make locally and globally. Recent attention to bullying in the schools was mentioned, along with attempts in several areas to balance bad behavior by acts of kindness. Attention to adult education elicited several areas of exploration: a year of reviewing biographies of Quaker pioneers; Quaker roles in the education of Native Americans; attitudes and beliefs regarding death,

afterlife, near-death experiences, etc. We agreed that there is always much yet to learn from our rich heritage.

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 noted the question recently in the news regarding the correlation between parental happiness and the presence of children. A concern was raised as to whether it is environmentally wise at this time to bring more than one child in each family. We considered who would be our family in a time of major crisis, who would we come to? We believe that social organizations can adjust and unrelated people can come together and support each other in times of need, despite the fact that our society is built on isolation and individualism. We thought about who we would protect from danger at such times. One family who chose to adopt children from another country recognized that this extended their sense of family internationally. In considering how we support various kinds of families, we thought immediately of our several elders living alone. One of our dear elders very recently died. We are aware of the importance of our being a supportive presence to those living alone and of the fact that in times of serious illness and death the immediate family plays the primary role. We are aware of the need that people have for community, that isolation is not

healthy and we regret that our society uses isolation as punishment in prisons. Some questioned whether today's children might be more self-centered and we recognize that, as adults, we might be promoting such attitudes. We who are parents need to understand how our children are communicating with us, to be sensitive to that and to keep channels open. Silence may be their way to get their own space. Making a place in our lives for a spiritual practice can help us grow in sensitivity to each other and in happiness. Grandparents can bring wisdom and perspective to families. We noted that the ideal for families suggested by the Query is not the experience of family most of us had as we grew up.

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: Friends are aware that gambling, smoking, drug use and the consumption of alcohol have a tremendous impact on our day-to-day lives. The harmful effects that these products have on many lives are well documented. We attempt to make wise choices in regard to the use of alcohol, drugs and tobacco products in our own lives and to help others avoid the problems that use of these items can cause. Appreciation was expressed for recent regulations that reduce

smoking in public places. In some ways our lives can seem more complicated now than in previous times. We try, however, to conduct our lives in honest and simple ways by making efforts to keep unnecessary material possessions and activities from over-cluttering our lives. We believe that most Friends have recreational activities that promote and foster mental, physical and spiritual health. We hope the practice of these activities helps others make healthy choices as well. We try to act with fairness and integrity in our associations with others and are conscious to avoid language that is offensive and oppressive.

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 considered the advice on civic responsibility. We spoke to ways we feel we fail to live this advice, to the complexities of knowing what Truth is, and how that complexity makes it difficult for some to speak out in our communities. It is not sufficient to speak and act for social justice because we feel social pressure to do so. An external obligation is not the foundation for speaking truth to power. We must be led by the Holy Spirit from within. We try to make choices that, however small, come from within. One member is glad to be part

of the Fulbright community. It is not an easy task to know what we believe or what we need to do. We are aware that to stay informed about the world can be a discouraging and daunting task, as we struggle to discern truth in the avalanche of information available today. One person recalled her teacher, Bob Berquist, who urged his students to stay informed. We considered the thinking of the writer, Margaret Wheatley, who has suggested that our society is lost in a world wilderness in which the usual ways of taking action are no longer working. She suggests the importance of discernment, of pausing to connect with the Spirit and listen to its voice. That Inward Teacher or Light can advise us, helping us find the path, speak truth to power, and to act with courage. We must begin always from the knowledge that there is that of God in all people. That can help us find the path through the wilderness.

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 deal with the desire to live sustainable, environmentally conscious lives in a culture that doesn't always make it easy or practical to do so. As middle class Americans, our use of energy is disproportionate. We need to use less energy and fewer resources to accomplish the tasks that we do, but we also need to recognize that we must do fewer tasks. We should be mindful of how we spend our money and the impact that can have. Friends Meeting can support us in our efforts, and individuals who live sustainably can inspire and

encourage us by example. It is important to recognize and express our appreciation for those who take positive steps. The large and growing number of humans on the planet reduces the impacts of our efforts to live in an environmentally responsible manner. Reducing family size can be as important as other lifestyle changes we undertake. We appreciate the use of the word "wellspring" in the Advice, reflecting both the internal and the external sources of our life.

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: Perhaps there should be another query: "How are we perpetrators of inequality and exploitation?" Sometimes I think my privilege is a result of the choices I have made. But to feel that way denies the existence of God, God's working in my life, and of God's grace and love for all of us. Even if you do everything right in your life, have faith in God, and make the right choices, because of the system's inequities, you can still be in dire circumstances and find it nearly impossible to rise above the situation. I'm reminded of the words of Abraham Lincoln: "As I would not be a slave, neither would I be a master." In my lot in life, it's easy to be a master and you have to go out of your way in order not to be. Since society rigs the game to

advantage the rich, it's important for us to work to "un-rig" the choice, and expose the negative of this system that favors a few. There must be opportunities for everyone, and we must work to make that happen. Charity can make us feel good, but can also help us ignore out responsibility to work for justice.

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: In the face of so much anger, violence and war in the world in which we live, even in the community where we serve, there is often a feeling of "what can one person do that will make any difference?" It is tempting to simply despair and sink into hopelessness. Yet, we don't give up; we continue to strive to educate ourselves and others as we try to understand what underlies such actions, as we seek a more peaceful path. We are aware that even Quaker families are not immune to sexual violence and we realize that we are not different from other families. We must not trust the peace testimony and the recorded history of alternative service or imprisonment rather than military conscription to shield us from the human traits of anger and resentment that surface in actions hurtful to others. Several personal experiences were shared in which we recognize

unloving reactions in situations that are out of our control or past aggressions against us foment for years before being made known, or are harbored secretly in families or communities that fail to deal with wrongs that cause life-long emotional injury to children. Is it any wonder that our world leaders, then, decide to use violence to counter violence? Bringing these issues out, recognizing that it is OUR problem, is the first step. We feel that this Query, if taken seriously, should make such discussions possible in every monthly meeting. It can't wait another generation! But we must not despair; we must still seek "that of God in every one" we meet.