

IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE)
2015 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 feel we really need to approach Meeting for Worship peacefully with a sense of anticipation for the blessed silence and preparing our hearts and minds to listen for God's leadings.

Our silence is not like the absolute vacuum of outer space, but is actually filled with natural sounds and those bleeding into our worship space. Meditation is not the same, but can be helpful in reaching our prayerful state.

Some of us listen to NPR discussion on the way to meeting and that can get us into thoughtful contemplation that can lead to the prayerful listening. Others find it helpful to listen to classical music before meeting.

Our meeting does not have much vocal ministry during Meeting for Worship and we wish there were more sharing. Perhaps we are doing too much self-censoring and feeling that our words are not important. However, when someone does share it is amazing how often those words come back to us at later times and other situations. Perhaps we could consider going back to having Meeting for Discussion before Meeting for Worship to get our minds 'charged up'. Also, there seems to be more sharing when there are more attending.

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?

Response: Individual involvement with different community groups, announcements in local newspapers, our newly created web page, and the internet through quakernet.org are our main efforts for outreach that we currently use. We realize there are opportunities we are missing because we haven't been deliberate about inviting others to join us for special events. David Zarembka's visit was a highlight of last year and the suggestion was made that we try to do more of this type of event.

We are often identified in the larger community by our social concerns and activities, and we discussed the benefit that would be gained by contacting other groups in the wider area who share our concerns. Sharing the spiritual base for our social concerns does not come easily for some of us even though we feel that this is often an important part of why we try to address certain issues. We seem to feel more comfortable letting our lives speak to the important issues of the environment, peace and social justice.

Intervisitation with other Friends groups is left up to individuals when they have opportunities even though we know we all benefit by these experiences.

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?

Response: We strive – and sometimes struggle – to carry the spirit of worship into our business meetings. It feels like a mouthful to say, but there is a good reason why our business sessions are called “Meetings for Worship with Attention to Business”. We are called to remember that we should always consult the Spirit, especially as we consider courses of action and the business of our meeting.

We considered the question of how to respond when someone accepts a role but then doesn't fulfill the duties responsibly. How do we support and encourage without nagging? How are we helpful but not pushy? We observed that the more action-oriented people may find it more difficult to patiently search for unity.

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?

Response: 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 within ourselves and seek to address that of God in those with whom we disagree?

In a Saturday afternoon session, we made a serious effort to use a worship sharing format as described by Patricia Loring in considering this query. No notes were taken until the end of our time together when each of us was asked what we are taking away.

We shared a sense that long needed healing was begun during the time of considering this query together. We have recognized our need to be vulnerable in the presence of each other (and of God). Through sharing those parts of our lives in which we feel vulnerable, we become closer and more understanding of each other. We have experienced the importance of being able to speak and to know that we are heard and acknowledged.

We believe that working together on some activity that meets a need in our community would bring us closer to each other. Perhaps we can seek such work. We are grateful for this time together during which we experienced the beginning of healing and a new level of closeness.

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?

Response: Through the life of the Meeting, we have all been touched with grace and tenderness by the many considerations of mutual care.

We are mindful of the health and welfare of all in our small and tender worship community, and strive to include distant members in our affairs through our “long distance query” participation and other meaningful correspondence.

We are challenged by the diminished participation of younger Friends and seek ways to invite and include this vital aspect of our

meeting community. One member commented that we sometimes tend to minimize the concerns or feelings of the children. Our dominant culture conditions us to pay more attention to adults than to children. Also, we seem to be socialized to give more weight and affirmation to the words and knowledge of men and boys than to the wisdom and experience of women and girls.

While Quaker ideals teach us to resist certain cultural expectations and roles, instead, living into God’s Wholeness and Love as a community, we can still fall short, all the while striving to care for one another.

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?

Response: In both secular and religious education we should be open to different points of view and opinions, recognizing there is no one right answer to most questions. Being open to questioning, and being exposed to different cultures and ideas are key to education. Young friends are incorporating Bible stories into First Day School once per month. Friends have sometimes been hesitant to teach the Bible, perhaps as a reaction to others who share a strict literal interpretation of the Bible. Providing the historical context of Bible stories is key to understanding the intent of the message. Friends' approach to the Bible can be summed up as: "Preach the gospel always. Use words as necessary."

Gender bias in education has improved over the years, yet women around the world continue to experience discrimination. Friends see limitations to our current education system in the US, and that teachers are discouraged.

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?

Response: There seems to be no different expectations for men and women in general in our meeting. We have tried to encourage each of our children to pursue their own path. We do see that only sons have returned to family farming operations in our own children, however, and this may be personal preference or just different expectations at the time they were growing up in the community. We do see more women being actively involved in farming in the community at large now, however, and understand that mechanization has made this more possible than in the past. Families are the major

testing ground for communicating skills and we can be very theoretical about this. However, when there are difficulties within the family it is very hard to put these ideals into practice. Some spoke of the effectiveness of using silence or “time-out” when feelings are running high. This gives those involved time to consider issues quietly and that often brings some type of resolution. Expressing forgiveness goes along with this technique, but is often difficult to say with honesty.

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?

Response: After noting others’ lack of personal responsibility, we were reminded that the only one whose personal responsibility we have control over is our own. We right now are not modeling personal responsibility and serenity, and not allowing spaces for reflection. One way that we can take personal responsibility would be in our willingness to be uncomfortable in some action we take: to refuse to go along with popular opinion as the people did who protested the PNC Bank’s investments in mountain top mining. We need to be willing to take risks and speak up against injustice. To be responsible we need to speak when we witness unconscious use of offensive or oppressive language and sometimes we fail to do this. One of us had a powerful personal awakening long ago and learned that speech intended to be supportive, might actually be dis-empowering for someone else. Waiting for others to complete their thoughts rather than jumping in to complete a sentence is a way that we respect others. To be listened to and to know you are listened to is important.

We need to model the behavior that we believe is a good way to live: it is the way to be most effective. We cannot force others. Meeting may be able to help us live lives of simplicity through our silent worship, through reflecting together and through modeling lives of simplicity. We can also be nurtured through our own reading and talking with others who have similar values.

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?

Response: Sometimes we become politically active when a particular issue is at stake and we become angry at the current trends or lack of action by government officials. We may then be spurred to become “a part of the solution” with hope for changes at the grassroots level. We learn that not all efforts are rewarded at the polls, but feel enough local support to try to do more. One person asked “is civil disobedience inconsequential?” citing recent Supreme Court decisions.

Trying not to just be angry: in our complex world with much corruption, “who can we trust”? We know that violence does not stop wrong-doing, only exacerbates it. It is surprising to learn that people who believe as I do may not be “good people” in their actions, while others who believe differently many join in the causes for justice and peace. Perhaps our motivation should be to do right rather than to effect change: one must feel compassion for all others and care of the environment in order to sustain any effort. Our daily lives reflect our attitudes and relationships with civil authority and carry on into interactions with the rest of the world. Simple deeds, exchanges, and purchases demonstrate how we really, personally, care for our immediate environs. Be a good neighbor! You may find yourself interested in organizations you know little about.

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?

Response: Perhaps listening to the Spirit and listening to the earth is the key to healing our relationship with the earth.

It is important to be aware of the proportion of the environmental resources we use. Being able to see these resources as “property of the common” might help us live in a way that is more sustainable.

When living in a human-made world, it is easy to lose our awareness of nature. Rising from synthetic sheets and putting on synthetic clothing, and going in a car to work all day in a human-made building, it is easy to lose appreciation of nature. Appreciation is fundamental, and when we can go outside and be in nature, we can remember and experience the beauty of God's world.

Unreasonable exploitation is a good place to start to examine our relationships. Humans can be exploited for easy energy such as in the mining of coal or tar sands extraction. It was a blessing to be raised on a

farm, with parents who took seriously the stewardship of the land. The ability to experience with all my senses the natural world around me has stayed with me throughout adulthood. Many times it is easy to feel helpless about what to do, and very difficult to find my public voice in order to talk about things like poisoning our aquifer and the oceans.

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?

Response: Friends talked about the New Jim Crow that has placed more people of color in prisons than ever before. Friends Journal has had articles about this problem and the corresponding issue of White Privilege. White Privilege is a difficult issue for many Friends to discuss as our community, our meetings, and the Society of Friends is largely white folks.

Anger against whites and white males that Friends have experienced can prevent needed empathy and dialog among F(f)riends. Many whites have advantages – education, employment, etc. What can/should we do about this? Being aware of history doesn't have to make us angry or feel guilty: it can make us more understanding of the psychological traumas that may affect their behavior today.

Can we live our lives so “we do no harm”? Exploitation for financial gain has affected many justice issues including food – the “get big or get out” trend. The idea of cheap food has allowed people in the U.S. to spend a smaller % of our income on food than in the 1950's. This injustice has created and continues to support a movement towards realistic food production. Many of us support the Coop movement. What would be the best way to help groups that have not assimilated? FCNL says one of Friends' goals is “to help everyone achieve their potential”.

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?

Response: We recognize that while our commitment to peace and non-violence calls us to be kind, kindness is sometimes not enough to address hate and aggression. While these are often blamed on religious and ethnic differences, it is important to note that it is not the differences that are the issue, but rather the behaviors of exclusion and lack of acceptance for those differences.

Another view is to remember that humans are social creatures by nature and we seek each other out, forming groups by shared similarities. What we seek is the “beloved community” of all beings, but falling short of that, we fall into looking at the world in terms of “us” and “them”. We cannot completely understand the nature of the “beloved community”, but we know that it calls us to journey beyond the human, beyond “us” and “them” until the “us” means all of us.

We also note the importance of making our views known by writing to newspapers and publishing opinion pieces. An example would be a recently published letter in the Cedar Rapids Gazette supporting the negotiations with Iraq rather than continuing on a war footing.

Additionally, we realize the importance of being mindful in what we do. Our emotions, both positive and negative, cycle -- much as breathing does between inhaling and exhaling. When we remain mindful of our condition, be it optimism-happiness-faith or doubt-confusion-fear, we can better respond in peaceful ways. We think of the example of the mindful way in which forgiveness was expressed after the shootings at the Emanuel AME Church and how it worked to diffuse the cycle of violence.