

IOWA YEARLY MEETING (CONSERVATIVE)
2017 QUERIES AND SELECTED RESPONSES

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 1: MEETING FOR WORSHIP

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 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?

RESPONSE

Quakers are stubbornly different from one another as well as from the rest of the world. For instance, many like coming into a room where the earlier arrivals have already settled into silence; it helps them settle in quickly as well. In fact, it seems that getting to Meeting very early to set up alone is an inspirational time as well. However, there are those who are so pleased to see other Friends after a week that they treasure the time before Meeting as a precious time for catching up,

There are other ways to help us come to Meeting for Worship ready to center ourselves. Those who attend Bible study before Meeting report having a rich fund of inspiration to help them go on to worship and indeed to the rest of the week, and those whose daily lives include moments or longer spells of quiet also find these practices to carry over into their First Day experience.

There are words that can help us connect with our spiritual selves, and there are words that divide us. Sometimes they are the same words. Asked if we all believe that there is a divine Spirit, many nodded, but others thought of it as meaning “God” and found uncomfortable associations with it. Similarly, “Sacred” was a term that most could apply to spaces as well as beings and that they found comfortable, whereas “Holy” had more overtly religious connotations. All seemed to feel that the “still, small voice within” was something they hoped to find in their quiet moments.

No matter what words we use, we agree that we want our worship to feel to old timers and newcomers alike to be a welcoming place and time where something out of the ordinary warms and guides us.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 2: OUTREACH

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

We try to welcome visitors and other Friends warmly whenever they join us for meeting and find it enriches and deepens our own worship experience.

Sharing with others who do not necessarily share our own religious experiences and ideas often brings us gifts we had not anticipated. Making connections under these circumstances bring opportunities for growth and often leave us with fresh perspectives about our own faith.

We continue to experience blessings that came with our 130th anniversary celebration including renewing family connections as well as the interest from the wider community that was demonstrated at that time.

Attending IYMC and other Friends meetings when traveling has been an enriching experience for those who have the opportunity.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 3: MEETING FOR BUSINESS

How can we hold our Meetings for Business in the spirit of love, understanding and patient search for unity without becoming frustrated by differences of opinion or the pressures of time?

How do we respond when no one else in the meeting seems to hold the views that we do on an issue? How do we respond to a dissenting minority?

How do we share responsibilities among Friends in our meeting? How do we serve our meetings?

RESPONSE

There are other questions as a part of this query, but we focused on these, searching for leadings on ways to find a sense of the meeting when there are differences of opinion. As we had someone among us with limited experience with Quaker ways of doing business, it was helpful to remind ourselves of what makes our meetings unique. We envy the sense of peace that often comes with business at Iowa Yearly Meeting Conservative and concluded that a part of that comes of long periods of silence, including during the times when the recording clerk is creating a minute.

Listening to each other is vital at yearly meeting and at successful business meetings at Penn Valley. If we are to find solutions, we must be able to let go of our own expectations and be open to those of others. If we are to avoid having a discontented minority, everyone must feel that they have been heard.

Finally, we seek to avoid the pitfalls that come with voting. We try to avoid two opposing sides, with one winning and the other losing. It helps to consider that Spirit is present with us and that residing in it may be a third way that we had not previously considered. To do that requires a worshipful attitude and an open mind and heart.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 4: HARMONY WITHIN THE MEETING

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

Since there have been few conflicts in our meeting in recent years, this query is challenging. Are we afraid to speak up? Do we not trust our own options? Are we ignoring differences that should be addressed? We feel there may be strength in finding answers to these questions. If we notice small differences and acknowledge them, then we will be ready for larger issues.

Our failings may be in the lack of awareness that there is a concern that requires attention either by Ministry and Counsel or Meeting for Business. As we grow stronger as a spiritual community, we gain personal confidence as well and hope that keeping in touch will be easier and welcome.

Those who have experienced attendance in other meetings expressed noticing that differences, or perhaps life experiences and educational backgrounds. One example was on the issue of support of the military.

Practicing in presenting and supporting ideas is often evident in those more skilled, whereas those who are not gifted in dialog may feel intimidated and less supported. We welcome any message and respect the speaker.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 5: MUTUAL CARE

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

The biggest change in how we keep in contact with others in the meeting has been our meeting email newsletter. It has kept us well informed of the activities of the meeting and sometimes aids in making decisions regarding an issue that can't wait to be addressed until regular meeting for business. The newsletter has also allowed us to keep in contact with those who have been part of our community but have moved on to another area. While this has proven very beneficial in many ways we are aware that personal contact is still the best way to maintain close relationships with one another.

We try to be aware of the need to make personal contact with those who have health issues and also those who do not use electronic communication. One expressed how important seeing familiar faces week after week at meeting for worship helps making difficult adjustments more manageable and gives support when difficult personal needs arise. Another person who was newly returned to the community shared how meaningful the memories of childhood growing up in the meeting had become.

Our recent Sunday school Christmas tree decorating party brought all the children together at one time and was a wonderful way for all of us to enjoy their activities.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 6: EDUCATION

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

We find the heart of education to be creativity nurtured by playfulness and inquisitiveness. If we are to be effective educators, we must not take ourselves too seriously. Nurturing our children is good for the health of the meeting. Parker Palmer used the phrase "the courage to teach." That is especially apt today. The world is changing so fast; some estimate that half of what children learn will be obsolete by graduation. In these circumstances, we certainly need "the courage to teach" but also the courage to learn, unlearn, and relearn. We should remember that we don't learn much if we only stay within our comfort zones.

In geology, we learn by looking at the edges of things. What happens at the edges not in the core is most revealing, whether observing rocks in a Lava flow, or the changes in continents. The insides of things tend to be homogeneous, the edges less so. The same holds for societies, where different cultures rub up against each other. At Scattergood School different cultures encounter each other. To its credit, it is a school with a lot of edges.

We form special bonds with our teachers. We honor their teaching and the experience of learning with them. This has been especially true for the guidance given by older Quakers and the strong relationships we have had with women among them. Margie Lacey made this point about the women of Yearly Meeting: "saying their names is an epiphany." We grieve our loss of them but also remember their teaching. They never told us what to do. What they did give us was a drive to think, listen and let God lead. For this we are grateful.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 7: HOME AND FAMILY

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

The response to this query occurred at a time of the year when many of us reconnect with traditions and memories that evoke a special meaning for families and create a shared happiness.

Past stories and present memories are shared in spirit that is unique to 60 our common understanding of what defines a family. We were challenged by one member to examine possibilities that stretch our awareness about what it means to have a “home”, what it means to provide “sanctuary”. For this member, family has come to be defined as “those who have your back and will stand with you, physically, emotionally, and psychologically in these spiritually bleak time”.

May we know resilience when troubled times descend on us. May we know a humble courage what there is opportunity to keep a stranger, as we keep our children, in love and safety, and out of harm’s way.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 8: PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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

We wondered what had been early Friends testimony regarding tobacco and alcohol use. One Friend who has studied his Quaker ancestry extensively shared that somewhere in his family’s history it was noted that a committee had been appointed by the Meeting to meet with a Friend regarding his excessive use of alcohol. Our impression is that historically -- perhaps 17th through 19th centuries --- Friends concern was in regard to excessive use rather than any use. In some of our own families alcohol simply was not used; in others moderate use was accepted. We reflected on the use of the Meeting appointed committee to meet with a Friend regarding excessive use, some perhaps feeling the Meeting was interfering, others realizing that such intervention could be appropriate and necessary. We recognize that our society today has a strong leaning toward individualism and individual responsibility, but we feel that in many situations a corporate responsibility is needed.

Today many of us feel challenged to be centered and at peace, not because of any issues related to alcohol or tobacco use, but because of the challenges our present national leadership is providing us, coming from a value system that feels alien. Every day it seems that something new confronts us and it is troubling. Again we need to challenge today’s obsession with individualism and try to move to a philosophy of collective responsibility, in regard to health care for example, we need to challenge the present administration’s way of defining community and family narrowly; this leads to a narrow understanding of the country’s responsibility. As we think about fairness and

integrity, we note that 'checking your truth' is important. We need to investigate to the best of our abilities and be open to being wrong and admitting it.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 9. CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

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 decisions through prayer and strengthen our actions with worship? Are we open to divine leadings.

RESPONSE:

Decorah Friends discussed the conflict between American Indians and a proposed oil pipeline that had the potential to poison their water supply and cross part of their tribal land. We are concerned about the continuing conflict between for-profit corporations and the health of our environment. We may not always oppose the laws but oppose how they are administered. Many friends have a continuing concern about the percent of our taxes that go to pay for the military. They see the Peace Tax Bill as an unresolved issue. Our local Peace and Justice Center does outstanding work on important issues and is currently involved with the issue of guns and the gun laws in Iowa and the U.S.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 10: ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

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 I 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:

In much of the Midwest environmental degradation has been subtle: soil erosion took quite a few years before it was really noticed; our water was clean before chemicals became common usage; etc. Now at last, we are aware that so much damage has been done it may be irreparable. How can we continue to be educated and educate others about the seriousness of our negligence? How can we wake people up?

Recent floods remind us that we have not always done the right things when we have acted. And the legislative bodies have not been changing how we build cities or how we do agriculture. Levees are only a temporary fix before they fail.

Our natural environment is our connection with the transcendent; for many just being outdoors is a means of spiritual renewal. There is an order that must be preserved and made available to everyone.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 11: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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

Several Quakers in Ames meeting shared experiencing discrimination from the Ames police force. An example shared was an African American child was playing in the park and the police stopped and asked the child what he was doing there.

This inspired our meeting to write a statement about this. Our meeting also invited the police chief to come and speak to us after meeting. We met with a police officer who listened to our concerns. The police officer shared what the police force is doing to decrease discrimination in their department. He mentioned trainings about discrimination the police officers regularly go to and eventually getting cameras for the officers.

He also shared a program where community members can go on ride a long with the police for a couple hours. A few from our meeting participated in this. As a meeting, we will continue to stay in communication with the local police and plan to have further dialogue with the police in the future.

CONSIDERATION OF QUERY 12: PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE

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 are reminded that the often-quoted phrase from the Bible, "where two or three are gathered together," occurs in the context of conflict resolution.

Many of us try to work for peace but wonder how to educate people. Giving to FCNL and lobbying our Senators and Representatives never seems like enough. How can we educate people to understand that security is not just a big army? It is people who are content with their lives.

War starts in our minds and starts with fear. The more that fear is cultivated, the greater the inclination toward violence against the perceived enemy. Although we can act to influence events as much as it is possible for us, peace starts inside, with dealing with fear. The only thing we have against fear is love. How do we teach love and create an environment where love is practiced and lived, and becomes a part of the way we think and what we do?