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Letters

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Letters

To the Editor:

The essay by R. W. Tucker ("Structural Incongruities in Quaker Service," *QRT*, Vol. 13, No. 1) leads me to share my belief that the organized projects and program committees of all our meetings and conferences are fallings-away from Quakerism. Members, volunteers, and hired persons may be doing all that they can to soothe the world's sores. But mostly the projects and committees do three things:

1. They react to events in the world rather than work with a spiritual focus.

2. They start with a built-in end result and are set up neither to search in a Quaker way nor to solve problems. . . .

3. They siphon off to a few Friends responsibilities that all Friends might accept. Who asks to set up a committee and be on it, and who is asked to be on it? The people interested in the subject at hand. They proceed at their own speed (sometimes enthusiastically) and then wonder why they cannot enlist others to help in the work. They pick up the action on an issue and carry it on as best they can; they bring the focus on an issue to themselves, but, no matter how they try to bring others into that light, they somehow poke about as if only they have a corner on it. In fact, they almost do, for the rest of the meeting does little in those areas where committees and programs exist. (For what seems to be an exception, see Jan de Hartog's *The Hospital*.) This goes for trustees, child-care, ministry and oversight, peace, and the graveyard. If you question the principle of a committee's action, someone may tell you that "we should have confidence in our committees." This is called letting Friends carry forward the concern.

Of course, a committee may in time hire someone to do its work. Friends call this setting up a program staff "to spark concern and to help Friends get involved." The wished-for action may come about, but rarely do those hinterland Friends involve themselves as they are supposed to; and what I think really happens is that the people hire some person, money changes hands, and what was to have been a program to get Friends involved becomes a semi-benign hireling priesthood. Somewhere along in the staff member's tenure, he begins to

try to justify his state of being a hireling. Naturally, this effort costs some more money. Then there is repeated talk about financial crises. This happens especially when these staff members have been primarily raising funds or reorganizing rather than doing the work for which they were hired. All of a sudden, money becomes permanently paramount and organization secondary (guess where religion comes?), and, in the case of New York Yearly Meeting's Peace and Social Action Program, we end up with no peace, no social action, and no program, but rather with lots of reorganization, phenomenal telephone bills, piles of waste paper and junk mail, and constant money worries. (If you think that is bad, take a look at the country-wide and international Friends' groups. When the human explorers find Friends on Mars, they will doubtless find them building a top-heavy organizational superstructure in the name of Quakerism.) Amongst other things, all this generates competitiveness in fund-raising/fund-spending ratios, and there is the spectacle of Friends complaining that so-and-so "spent \$1,000 to raise \$500" when those selfsame Friends may have spent \$2,000 to raise \$500 besides their own living expenses, usually referred to on the balance sheet as salaries, utilities, rent, and equipment. And, in case anyone wonders, even the most holy of our members — the released Friends — are still hired to do a job that could be done after the manner of Woolman.

No other organizations are any different, but we are supposed to be.

Very often in budget sessions in business meetings, or when Friends are speaking of money matters, and a member objects to the amount of expenses, particularly to the *rising* level of expenses, someone else will say, "Some Friends just do not realize that if we're going to have a good religion, we're going to have to pay for it." This remark refers to nothing more than giving money to the meeting. Now, what has our religion to do with money? The comment almost puts the money ahead of the God. It at least makes them equal. Does God really cost money? Is that what the motto on the United States coinage means? The query I raise when I look at the costs any meeting has in buildings, upkeep, power, telephones, and program is, "Are these Friends in any way substituting the outlay of their money for their time, blood, and energy?" I have seen a lot of money going around as surrogate experience. Friends, however, call it "channeling resources where they are most needed." Somehow, only money gets channeled so effectively that way. Of course, it really does not, because even a year

before the money comes in Friends spend hours haggling over it. It happens, incidentally, that God always gets lost (not just equal or second place) under all the money. This shows up in the fact that unity behind a money matter draws out the big guns (!) and all the fire from Friends, when a matter such as worship draws out much less. We have more pressure for fiscal honesty than spiritual honesty. There is a lot of outlay and bickering, but not much of that good religion that some say we have to buy.

This is, then, how things go wrong. However, we have procedures for finding the right way forward; we do not seem to use them very often. We lack religious discipline in that there is little concrete group religious responsibility or process, and I mean this in business and worship. Who knows what it is to have God call you to do something or be something? Who has seen solid group searching for light in our meetings recently, if at all? It is all very well to do what we can in areas of social concern, and very fine to emphasize to others that we are a *religious* society, but it is not exactly a matter of clear and threshed-out action in the first case or of honesty in the second. I am not anxious now to hear a remark that "religion isn't in the worship so much as in the action," for, while that is true, the basis of the Religious Society of Friends is that the actions come out of the worship and testing and out of that inspiration which comes from a religious discipline or sensitivity. We are not Quakers because we believe in (say) a peace testimony but rather because we have worshipped with others, sought together, and then threshed out together a peace testimony from our experience. (How can we *teach* this in First-day school?) So, as a society, we base ourselves on the idea of going where the inner light leads each of us *and* on the idea of group seeking to uplift those lights in each of us. You help me, I help you, they help us, we help them, etc. This, I believe, is the kind of thing we should be after — I just wish that we could begin to be willing to do this more closely together than we do. All the good intentions get us nowhere.

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