

2014

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Recommended Citation

Graves, Sylvia (2014) "Friends United Meeting," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 123 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol123/iss1/6>

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FRIENDS UNITED MEETING

SYLVIA GRAVES

THE IDENTITY OF FUM

Approved at the June 2006 meeting of the Friends United Meeting General Board was a process to develop a Strategic Plan that would guide us in the next five years' work. The Board had been struggling, they said, to give a clear direction to the staff. The expenses of the organization had far exceeded the income for several years and the endowment was dwindling because it was being used to subsidize the General Fund budget. And, the tension brought about by the FUM hiring policy which has been a strong indicator that we didn't agree on our core theology had contributed to the burn out of several key leaders in recent years. (I know that because they told me.) It was hoped that a Strategic Plan would help bring clarity to the position from which we minister and more efficiency to our work. In the initial work session for developing a strategic plan, we identified these areas of focus for improvement: Administration, Communication, Evangelism, and Identity. It was the Identity focus group that labored the longest and strongest, and still harbors points of disagreement.

The wide range of theology among Friends was no surprise to me but in my nearly six years of serving as General Secretary, several times I found myself trying to explain how FUM is different from Friends General Conference and Evangelical Friends International and Conservative Friends in several places where I visited. I would open my arms out wide and indicate that on one hand are those Friends we call evangelical. They are people who study and know scripture and value the Bible as the authority for their faith and practice. In conversations with an evangelical Friend one is likely to hear such phrases as "what the Lord did in my life today" and other references to certain terms from scriptures that define the necessary steps to salvation. They are most likely to have pastors and affirm the authority of the pastor given to him/her by God's call and through training to guide the congregation in their spiritual development. Besides having a sermon, their worship allows for plenty of time for singing hymns and praise choruses. They take up an offering and make it

known that regular contributions to the church are biblical. What distinguishes evangelical Quaker worship from other fundamentalist denominations is that they often include a brief time of silence for centering or to allow testimonies. Most are faithful to traditional Quaker business procedures, although even those are not always followed or understood. These Friends are usually charity and mission minded, and feel compelled to take the gospel to those who have not heard it or accepted it.

In my other hand and at the other end of the spectrum are those Friends who value the tradition of early Friends to worship as a gathered meeting centered on the image of the Living Christ at their center. They sit in silence and seek the presence of the Holy Spirit who may speak to them through the voice of a few present as they rise to minister out of the silence. Many of these Friends are quite knowledgeable about scripture, but most believe that God continues to speak directly to us in the here and now and, therefore, that the Bible is a good source of teaching, but not the ultimate authority. These Friends may appoint spiritually mature people to act as elders to be on Ministry and Oversight, Ministry and Council, or whatever term is selected to define those “weighty” Friends, but more often than not, do not buy into the idea of “hireling” ministers to do their work for them. Very socially conscious, these Friends are likely to put their faith to work in matters of equal rights, peace building, and justice.

Then I explain that FUM contains the whole range of Friends represented in both hands and all the ones at various positions between. I also point out that the people represented in the right hand are not always happy about the people in the left hand being part of FUM and vice versa, and that that is where our tension lies. In the brief history that Tom Hamm wrote and presented for us at an “Identity Retreat” in June of 2007, he begins by saying, “Probably no Quaker entity has had a history so characterized by difference and controversy as Friends United Meeting, which was for its first sixty years the Five Years Meeting of Friends.” When I heard Tom say that, I was at first rather ashamed that FUM had wasted so much time arguing over the past hundred years, but then I was pleased to think we had been strong enough to survive the disagreements, found ways to work together in spite of them, and now can point to many good ministries that have encouraged and empowered thousands of people over the years. Here are some elements that contribute to the tension in FUM.

- The FUM General Board representatives come from a variety of Quaker cultures even within the US. For example, expectations and understanding of Quaker business procedures are different. We have tension in our board meetings because some think we should have more worship and/or dialogue and some think we should “get on with it.”
- The wide range in cultures and theology causes us to have irreconcilable differences with some issues. The most known issue is the FUM hiring policy approved twenty-five years ago that affirms “the civil rights of all people. Staff and volunteer appointments and promotions are made without regard to sex, race, national origin, age, physical disability or sexual orientation. It is expected, however, that intimate sexual behavior should be confined to traditional marriage, understood to be between one man and one woman.” People who believe homosexuality is a God-given trait that deserves welcome among people of faith don’t like that policy. Some people who believe homosexuality is a sinful choice think the policy is too lenient. It seems both sides would like to change the other.
- Having such variation in theology sometimes makes it difficult for staff to know how to represent FUM.
- Defining the financial responsibilities of our member yearly meetings is left to the yearly meetings. Yet the number of representatives to the board is fairly distributed and based on population of the yearly meeting. Some of our most vocal representatives come from yearly meetings who send little or no support to the general operating expenses of the organization.

THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF FUM

We are presently an association of 32 yearly meetings plus two Associations of Friends: Eleven in the US, plus Cuba, Jamaica and Canadian Yearly Meetings on this side of the globe while on the other side we have eighteen yearly meetings in Kenya, one in Uganda and one in Tanzania. Our membership in North America numbers about 35,000. In East Africa it’s even more of a challenge to take a census than it is in North America, but they estimate there could be nearly ten times that many Friends in over 2000 monthly meetings.

In January of 2009, while speaking to the General Board in Kenya, I was trying to put it in this perspective: In the 1960's Kenya had only one yearly meeting which was East Africa Yearly Meeting. It was based in Kaimosi where Five Years Meeting was doing most of its work on the 1100+ acres we called the mission compound. At any time between 1955 and 1970 between 50 and 60 American or European missionaries had come to the mission compound to live and minister in such places as the Girls High School, a primary school, the nurses training school, the teacher training school, the Friends Bible School (now Friend Theological College), Kaimosi Hospital, an industrial plant for producing electricity and supplying running water, and a printing press. At that time American Friends who supported the Kenyan missions were thriving and we enjoyed membership of at least three times what we have presently. Now, as the number of American Friends is dwindling, the number of African Friends is growing. Most of those mission entities are currently in the hands of Kenyan organizations and only Friends Theological College is being managed by FUM. The new FTC principal is a Kenyan and when an American is hired to serve in the FUM office in Kisumu, he/she will be the only American appointed by FUM in East Africa. And the Kenyans themselves are conducting mission endeavors among the Turkana and Samburu people and venturing into nearby countries such as South Sudan, Tanzania, and others.

At that time (in 2009) we (John Muhanji, Eden Grace, Kelly Kellum, and I) thought it was important for the Friends in East Africa to see that it is becoming more and more unlikely that American Friends will be able to financially sustain all the FUM work being done in Africa and we have reached the point where Friends in East Africa should rely more on their own resources. Kenyan Friends also believe they have resources to contribute. FUM is trying to focus according to the four priorities named some years ago for FUM work: Communication, Evangelism, Leadership Development, and Global Partnerships. If we are truly working with East African Friends as Global Partners, we have to change the thinking we used to have from “we Americans are bringing Light to the darkness” to “we all have Light to share with each other and we need to work within it as equals.”

Besides supporting partner projects in Kenya, overseas ministries currently underway in Friends United Meeting include Ramallah Friends School, which was started in 1869 and is thriving! It is highly

respected as a place where nearly 1200 Christian and Muslim students learn together. Prepared by a very rigorous international baccalaureate curriculum and values that build them into strong and moral leaders, nearly 100% of graduates go on to college with about a third of them coming to the U.S. to enroll in such colleges as Harvard, MIT, Boston College, Earlham and Guilford. In recent years there has been much effort spent to plan a commercial development along the sports field that, when opened, will provide additional revenue for the school budget beyond what is now collected in school fees and donations. The Ramallah Friends Schools are counting on FUM to be around for at least the next hundred years.

FUM has also been working in Belize with the main priority a continuation school that gives a second chance for education to youngsters who have failed their 8th grade exam and therefore have little or no opportunity for further education. A small school in a very needy part of Belize City, it nevertheless has succeeded in getting hundreds of students enrolled in high school after a year or two of instruction. FUM is currently looking at other opportunities for ministry in Belize.

On the discouraging side, due to dwindling financial support from our member yearly meetings, FUM has had to make significant cuts in the budget and the board has approved using some money from the endowment for general operating costs. In the past two decades, the number of staff employed at the Richmond office has been reduced from thirty to nine currently, with five of them working part-time. To cut more, the board realizes, will cripple the organization so that we cannot maintain our current functions. Friends United Meeting, as are most other denominational organizations, is feeling the effects of a society that has become disenchanted with institutional religion and declining membership.

However, we are glad to report the recent (June 2014) approval at the Triennial sessions in Marion, Indiana of these initiatives:

1. An increasing effort to balance the voices of all member yearly meetings on an expanded Executive Board resulted in adding even more East African representatives to the EB and calls for **all** members to accept greater responsibility for financial participation.
- In recognition that FUM can no longer rely primarily on the old structure and expectations that member yearly meetings will pay their “dues,” an additional means of gaining revenue

includes a capital campaign to take place over the next three years.

- As a result of gathering global input following an initiative called “Forty Days of Prayer,” FUM will use funds contributed in the Capital Campaign to increase the production of written resources and opportunities for leadership training.

THE FUTURE OF FRIENDS UNITED MEETING

If Friends United Meeting is to rise above its disagreements, it will require some deliberate and Spirit-led steps that must be owned and accepted by its people. These are some that are underway:

1. The General Board has repeatedly affirmed that FUM will remain true to its Orthodox Christian Quaker heritage whose roots are in the *Richmond Declaration of Faith* and *The Christian Faith of Friends* (a pamphlet written by Ben Richmond but commissioned by the North American Ministries Committee) and expressed in our purpose statement. It has been said by a few representatives of the “united” yearly meetings (those who belong to both FGC and FUM) that there are many in their yearly meetings who look to FUM for Christian fellowship and service. FUM does not need to become more like FGC or EFI but needs to remain strongly committed to Christian Faith and Practice while working globally to serve God and bring people into fellowship with him.
2. Increase the sense of personal and corporate ownership in the work of Friends United Meeting in **all** of its member organizations.
3. Promote widespread acceptance that in FUM there are many cultures on this continent as well as globally. If we are to work as global partners, we must understand that we are at different places in our spiritual journeys, represent varieties of ethnic heritages, and define “moral” using different standards. We must look out for each other, lift each other to higher places when we are able and reach out for help when we are in need. There seem to be many people who think FUM should match their own brand of theology, yet have not recognized the differences in their own monthly meetings and yearly meetings

who, like FUM, are likely to represent a wide range of beliefs and faith expressions.

4. Consider and allow some parts of the FUM agenda to be unique for the American General Board and which are relative to only the African General Board. Which part of the agenda can be shared? As the needs to expand the staff in Kisumu (Africa Ministries Office) are defined, how will the expenses be met? How will FUM look when we turn more leadership responsibilities over to the Africans and redefine the responsibilities held by Americans?

My greatest concern as we work through the dilemmas and solutions to improve the effectiveness of FUM ministries is that we hold at the center of all we do the Love taught to us by Jesus. If we are truly a Christ-centered association of Friends, it is of utmost importance that we seek to understand and live his welcoming unconditional love, practice forgiveness, and let God do the judging.