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# BEYOND THE BUREAUCRACY: THE TRUE & PROPER PURPOSE OF QUAKER YEARLY MEETINGS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ROBIN MOHR

In short, the true and proper purpose of Quaker yearly meetings, in all times and in all places, is to help Friends to do God's will.

This paper is based on a comparison between a passage in Brian Drayton's and Bill Taber's book, *A Language for the Inward Landscape*,<sup>1</sup> held up against the written statements of purpose in the contemporary books of *Faith and Practice*<sup>2</sup> from thirty yearly meetings. Do they agree or do they contradict each other? This paper argues that they are in harmony.

Second, I assert that the workings of a Quaker yearly meeting are the embodiment of the public theology of the constituent Friends, just as the yearly meeting's book of *Faith and Practice* is the articulation of it. This theology varies from yearly meeting to yearly meeting but is consistently reflected in their respective practices. Additionally, this diversity is fully encompassed by the true and proper purpose of Quaker yearly meetings.

Rather than an historical overview, I examine the current practices of Quakers in 2017; nonetheless, the thesis may hold for other historical periods. This paper focuses on examples from English-speaking Friends in North America; however, the conclusions drawn may be relevant to Quakers in other parts of the world.

By the bureaucracy, I mean what is most visible about a yearly meeting: the events, the programs, the committees, the staff, collecting money and keeping records. But this is what they do, not why they exist. Denominational structures exist for a reason, usually multiple reasons. In 1929, Richard Niebuhr listed the sociological reasons for the existence of denominations, which although damning, are still compelling.<sup>3</sup> But along with the Presbyterian theologian, Barry Ensign-George,<sup>4</sup> I believe there are good and relevant theological reasons for denominational structures. It is not enough to say,

“because it has always been this way.” So why? Why do Friends still have yearly meetings?

Yearly meetings have been part of the infrastructure of the Religious Society of Friends since the 1660s.<sup>5</sup> A yearly meeting is: “A body consisting of Monthly Meetings from a geographically extended area, whose members are invited to gather in annual session to worship and conduct business together. This term is also used to denote the total membership of the constituent Monthly Meetings of a designated Yearly Meeting.”<sup>6</sup> Within the Quaker denomination, a yearly meeting is the body with the authority to publish or designate a book of discipline, often called the *Book of Faith and Practice*, for its member meetings.<sup>7</sup>

As I discuss the true and proper purpose<sup>8</sup> of yearly meetings in the 21st century, I want to be clear about the multiple ways that Friends use this term. Like “church,” the term “yearly meeting” can refer to an event, to a legal institution, and to a group of people. In 2013, New England Yearly Meeting (proper names including “Yearly Meeting” hereafter YM) recognized the need to make a clear statement about their multifaceted existence. On their website it now says, “We are: A People • A Network of Meetings • A Gathering • A Structure for Service • An Organization Empowering Ministry.” They continue to use this five point statement to clarify the confusion even among themselves.<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will consider the yearly meeting as a whole—its events, its programs, its people—as a unit. The events and programs could not exist without the people, but the people would not be conscious of and knowledgeable about themselves as a people without the institutional programs and events binding them together.

We are familiar with the term “the body politic,” meaning, according to the dictionary, “a people regarded as forming a political body under an organized government.”<sup>10</sup> I ask you to indulge me in using the term “the body ecclesiac”: the people regarded as forming a religious body within an organized denomination. This is sometimes referred to as “the church,” when we specify the people of the church, not the building or the institutions. But “church” is a word with many meanings, and I want to be as clear as possible.

Quakers are strongly conscious of themselves as actors in their denominational decision-making. This is what makes Friends a useful case for the study of public theology. Quaker practice varies across

yearly meetings, but Friends' ecclesial polity is highly participatory, and our theology is often not produced by trained academics but by the body ecclesiac, and is thus a useful reflection of, and window into, our public theology.

I have heard it said among North American Friends, "Our purpose is worship." This is usually stated in opposition to some call to join in some political action from any part of the political spectrum. Of course, none of our institutions is monolithic, and no human being is a single story.<sup>11</sup> But for a religious entity, worship is a good start.

The purpose of worship is to realign our will, our understanding and our values with God's. The same is true for yearly meetings. Consider the following passage from Drayton's and Taber's excellent book, *A Language for the Inward Landscape*:

A meeting's faithfulness depends in great measure on the faithfulness of its members. A meeting's discernment and sensitivity, its ability to preserve unity even when there is diversity of opinion, is made possible because some of its members are dwelling in the unity before the meeting even gathers for worship or business. A meeting's health is maintained if at least a core of the participants are well practiced in true waiting (which is not the same as just being silent), and the meeting is strengthened as the members, individually and together, practice living the life behind the words we have been discussing.

Our 'purpose' in centering is to move into an altered state of consciousness in which we become aware of the ordering, orienting power of the Spirit. We don't worship in order to receive messages, or otherwise accomplish our own agenda, but to realign our will, understanding and values with God's. Once we reach that place of clarity, we can in our prayer bring a need, a question, or a hope, so that it is illuminated. When we move from a period, perhaps in a First Day meeting for worship, or at some other time and setting, in which the consciousness of Christ's presence is at center stage, into the other facets of life outside the meeting, we can stay gathered even as we do so. In this way, the consciousness of the Holy most directly helps us see the holiness present in our daily affairs. As we maintain or refresh that awareness, dipping back into a fuller state of attention from time to time (even for a microsecond), we are also able to be aware when we are acting or speaking in a way that separates us from the Presence, or dulls it; and this is warning and invitation

to re-chart our course. So it is possible to dwell in watchfulness; and from the earliest days of the movement, 'in some ordinary activities no special guidance was looked for, and it was enough that Friends found in themselves no contrary balks or 'stop to their minds' (Barbour, 114, quoted in Drayton).<sup>12</sup>

To summarize, then, the purpose of Quaker worship is to realign our will, our understanding and values with God's. This statement was written about worship in a local meeting, but the same holds true for yearly meetings. The work of a yearly meeting is similar to that of a monthly meeting, but on a larger scale.<sup>13</sup> As a yearly meeting, Friends worship together, perform our business process writ large, reinforce our community bonds, make plans for the coming year, and write our books of discipline. But the true and proper purpose of all these actions is to assist Friends to align themselves, and the actions of their monthly meetings, with the will of God.

All yearly meeting sessions include large worship gatherings that reflect the dominant worship practices of the body ecclesiac, organized by gifted practitioners of each form of worship. In some yearly meetings, these plenary worship sessions are understood as the primary reason for attendance at the events.<sup>14</sup> In other cases, the plenary worship is merely preparation for further work in the world.<sup>15</sup> Most yearly meetings see worship and business as intertwined. For Ohio YM, "It is both a sober and a joyous opportunity for its members to meet together in unity of purpose. As a consequence of the united spiritual concern felt by the attenders, and the deep searching for the Divine Will pervading the whole assembly, its business meetings, as well as those for worship, become times of spiritual refreshing."<sup>16</sup>

Often the purpose of a yearly meeting as stated in its book of *Faith and Practice* is written at a very functional, bureaucratic level. Two of the largest yearly meetings in North America, at opposite corners geographically and theologically, state their purpose like this: "The main function of the Evangelical Friends Church Southwest is to equip and enable our churches and people to do together what they cannot do alone."<sup>17</sup> In Philadelphia YM, "In meeting for worship for business and other forums, members come together in annual or special sessions for assessment of the life of the Society, the conduct of business, spiritual refreshment and commitment, and the renewal of the bonds of friendship."<sup>18</sup>

Across the branches of Friends, yearly meetings' business sessions are an opportunity for Friends to observe experienced Friends as

clerks and participants, and to develop new skills in the ordering of their collective work in alignment with God's will. The practices in these sessions vary according to the respective traditions of each yearly meeting, but in each case, they are an important part of the identification and formation of new leaders within the body ecclesiac, and a kind of continuing education for recognized leaders.

From an Evangelical perspective, Evangelical Friends Church - MidAmerica YM states: "Friends conduct their business in the framework of worship during announced meetings, called business sessions. All members are urged to participate in the business of the church. This organizational pattern is designed so that members will develop and exercise their gifts in personal ministry."<sup>19</sup>

New England YM uses language that is common in other *Faith and Practices*: "The Yearly Meeting consists of the entire membership of its constituent monthly meetings. The purpose of its annual assemblies is to help order their affairs and to maintain and promote Christian faith, love, and practice. All members have both the privilege and the responsibility of attending sessions and participating in the deliberations."<sup>20</sup>

And on the independent side, North Pacific YM reminds members that, "The plenary sessions, occasions for dealing with business, also provide opportunities for spiritual growth. They consider reports from Friends' organizations, Steering Committee, and other committees; give attention to communications, including preparation of an 'Epistle to Friends Everywhere;' and deal with appropriate business and concerns."<sup>21</sup>

The gathering of Friends in business and in fellowship in the large body reinforces our community bonds, unites Friends with common interests and concerns across the geographic breadth of the yearly meeting, and enables the acknowledgement of spiritual gifts on a larger scale, whether through the recording of ministers or the naming of clerks and committees for the whole region.<sup>22</sup> This work takes on varying nomenclature, but is widely practiced.<sup>23</sup>

The breadth of reach is part of the exponential strength of a yearly meeting. As the General Secretary of Philadelphia YM reports,

The programs that we have for children, middle schoolers, and young Friends, the retreats that we have, the events that we have for them, they are essential, they're part of our identity. But more than that, the youth and the adults who participated in them are fed and empowered and experience the community

of God within those groups. And it's not just *their* experience for that weekend event, but then the next day, they go to work, they go to school and it affects people there. And the next week they go to meeting and their experience of having been in the youth program event affects that meeting. There's an exponential impact of the youth programs in the way that we've been running them.<sup>24</sup>

The work of the yearly meeting is not only to serve Friends and their meetings internally but also to assist them in ameliorating conditions and addressing injustice in the world. Indiana YM states

The Yearly Meeting exists to provide order and to regulate its constituent bodies so that Friends may maintain a Christian faith and witness in a spirit of love and unity... Through its annual session and the work of its committees and other bodies the Yearly Meeting seeks a clear understanding of how the Christian faith as discerned by Friends enables us to identify and understand the forces shaping the destiny of men and women. Friends seek together, through worship, consultation and use of resources, to provide Christian alternatives to the forces which plague the human race. These forces include poverty, hunger, greed, war and indifference to human rights and justice. In corporate effort all members are strengthened and held accountable in the counsel of the Lord. In the wisdom and power of Jesus Christ our Lord, all meetings are to be held in the spirit of seeking the will of God in the Light of the revelation through Christ and the gift of grace to overcome evil with good.<sup>25</sup>

Across all the branches of Friends, the yearly meeting alone has the authority to publish the book of discipline.<sup>26</sup> In the language of North Carolina YM Conservative, "The evolution of a Yearly Meeting's Book of Discipline is generally a testimony to the power of faith and of the Quaker method in educating and sensitizing conscience. A Discipline is both a moral guide and a manual of structure and government within the Body. The document is revised from time to time. Additions and revisions show the evolution of moral consciousness as it becomes more sensitive to spiritual and social inharmonies."<sup>27</sup>

Even as yearly meetings perform the bureaucratic parts of their work, keeping records, collecting funds from constituent members and reporting on the same, they are careful to state the ways that this work furthers God's purposes. In this sense, the whole book of *Faith and Practice* consists of advice about doing God's will in the manner of Friends.<sup>28</sup> Do any yearly meetings contradict this argument? No.

Across the branches of Friends, there are examples of more or less explicitly Christian language. There are examples of more or less subordinate/superior language.<sup>29</sup> But these are reflections of the public theology held by the respective yearly meetings.

Despite the remarkable unity in the written statements of purpose of Quaker yearly meetings across the branches of Friends, there are noticeable gaps in the implementation of their purpose. Here we find the very human limitations of Friends' ideals. As Niebuhr says about all Christian denominations, "The domination of class and self-preservative church ethics over the ethics of the gospel must be held responsible for much of the moral ineffectiveness of Christianity in the West."<sup>30</sup>

Being human, we have multiple needs and goals and varied strategies for achieving them - in the same place, the same institution, even within the same body and mind and soul. Being human, we do what we ought not and we fail to do what we ought. We forget what we came for, what we were made for. This is not new, and not limited to Quakers.<sup>31</sup> Being human, we keep changing how we do our work to fit our times.<sup>32</sup> For some 21st century Friends, this is a central insight and a virtue in their faith and practice. For others, it is a human failing.<sup>33</sup>

The cultural flashpoints of the last three centuries (slavery,<sup>34</sup> evolution,<sup>35</sup> same sex marriage<sup>36</sup>)—the issues that have led to splitting of yearly meetings in each century, and are still going on today—are evidence that our conflicts are essentially about the will of God for Friends. But the life of a yearly meeting is never a single story; conflicts within and between yearly meetings always involve a combination of elements of theology, personality, money and power. Theological differences are often stated at the forefront. Questions of power and authority are often recognized as the second driver of divisions. But a theology without charismatic personalities expounding it fails to gain traction, and without abrasive personalities, fails to drive division. Anxiety about money and the growing or declining financial situation of a yearly meeting is another force that drives meetings beyond tolerable levels of dissent.

A number of questions are raised by this investigation,<sup>37</sup> not least of which is whether or not yearly meetings are still fulfilling their rightful role. The decline in the use of yearly meeting queries as an active measure of the integrity of Friends' practice may be reflected in the decline of impact of Quaker testimonies in the wider world.<sup>38</sup> If an



organization does not know why it does its work, if the body ecclesiac cannot consciously articulate its purpose, it tends to waste energy and money. We get caught in eddies of irrelevance and find new things to bicker about, distracting us from our true calling: formation in the vocation of being the Quakers the world needs. The world in 2017 needs more integrity, more peace, more faithful service, in all countries, places, islands and nations. That is why this is important for the world and not just an academic question.

Here is the thought I would most like to leave you with: A yearly meeting is more than its denominational infrastructure. The true and proper purpose of a Quaker yearly meeting is to assist Friends and their local meetings to align their will, their values, and their understandings with God's. Drayton and Taber point the way toward a better understanding of this. Their book is too new to be quoted in any of the current books of discipline, but I expect it will be in the future.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Brian Drayton and William P. Taber, Jr. *A Language for the Inward Landscape: Spiritual Wisdom from the Quaker Movement*. Chapter 6, "Community and the Inner Life of the Meeting." Philadelphia: Tract Association of Friends, 2015.
- 2 Each yearly meeting names its book differently. Most use the term *Faith and Practice* or *Book of Discipline*, but not all. Some yearly meetings adopted new versions during the writing of this paper.
- 3 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company Inc., 1929, renewed 1957.
- 4 Barry Ensign-George, *What Does It Mean to Be a Denomination?*
- 5 Thomas Hamm, *The Quakers in America*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, p.26. See also Pacific YM, *Faith and Practice: A Guide to Quaker Discipline in the Experience of Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, 2001, p. 129
- 6 PacYM, p. 206. Among Friends, a monthly meeting or Friends church (these two terms are synonymous, Evangelical Friends Church - Mid America Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice: The Book of Discipline*, 2008, p. 40) is the local decision-making body holding authority for memberships and marriages. As might be expected, this group typically meets monthly to conduct business in the manner of Friends (PacYM, p. 129). A yearly meeting is frequently divided into quarterly meetings, sometimes called area meetings; and has varying amounts of power and authority over monthly meetings. This degree of authority varies by the yearly meeting and by the century.
- 7 Evangelical Friends Church-Southwest, *Faith and Practice*, 2011, p.32: "Friends' history shows that each Yearly Meeting held final authority, making it almost a separate denomination. Larger groupings of Yearly Meetings provided shared ministries, but each had its own Faith and Practice, including its own statement of faith."
- 8 Within this paper, I am generally using words in their common, ordinary meanings. Herein, the term "true" implies factual and knowable, not "false" in either the sense of

intentional deception or unintentional error. The term “proper” implies appropriate and correct in a given context. Here, I am primarily using “proper” in a Quaker sense, meaning most closely aligned with God’s will, as ascertained by our human minds and communal discernment, including Scriptural alignment. The term “purpose” implies the reason for being, the goal of existence, explaining why Friends dedicate time, money, and energy to this structure.

The term “Quaker” (PacYM, p. 203) pertains to the Religious Society of Friends, also known as the Friends Church, the movement founded by George Fox and others beginning around 1650. In this paper, “Quakers” and “Friends” will be used interchangeably as synonyms. Occasionally in this paper, I will use “we” to refer to Quakers as a whole, myself included. As a participant even more than a researcher, I found it rang false, meaning deceptive, to do otherwise.

- 9 <https://neym.org/neym-does/what-is>, accessed 11/13/17
- 10 *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*. New York: Random House, 1991, p. 153
- 11 TEDGlobal 2009. Chimamanda Adichie: “The danger of a single story”, TED, July 2009”. [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story) Retrieved 13 November 2017.
- 12 Drayton & Taber, *Language for the Inward Landscape*, p.92-93.
- 13 Baltimore YM, *Faith and Practice of Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)*, 2012, p. 234.
- 14 New York YM: *Faith and Practice: the Book of Discipline of the New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, 2014, p. 58: “The yearly meeting exists principally to worship together.”
- 15 Rocky Mountain YM, *The Faith and Practice Rocky Mountain Yearly Meeting of the Friends Church*, 2000, <https://rmym.org/about-rmym/rocky-mountain-ym-calling/>:  
 “Rocky Mountain Yearly Meeting is ... an environment in which souls may be saved, transformed, and renewed, reaffirming our mission statement: Building the Kingdom of God through Obedience to Christ. Soul work is something we participate in, while God does the work. There is no yearly meeting central office that can make the salvation, transformation, and renewal of souls a priority in our yearly meeting. Rather, souls will be a priority in our yearly meeting as each church commits itself to that priority.”
- 16 Ohio YM, *The Book of Discipline of Ohio Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, 2014, p. 21.
- 17 EFCSW, p. 32.
- 18 PhYM, 2002, p. 194.
- 19 EFCMAYM, p. 40.
- 20 New England YM, *Interim Faith and Practice 2014 (2015 Edition)*, *New England Yearly Meeting of Friends*, and 1985 edition, <https://neym.org/faith-practice/part-4/chapter-1/yearly-meeting>, See also Canadian YM of the Religious Society of Friends, “Organization and Procedure”, *Book of Christian Discipline of Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, 2016, p.43.
- 21 North Pacific Yearly Meeting, *NPYM Faith and Practice* as accepted in Annual Session on July 29, 2017, Ch. 8, p. 2.
- 22 PacYM, p.168, See also South Central Yearly Meeting, *Procedures Manual*, 2017, p. 12; Western YM, *Faith and Practice of Western Yearly Meeting of Friends Church*, 2005 p. 1.
- 23 Ohio Valley YM, *Faith and Practice: Book of Discipline of the Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting Religious Society of Friends*, Online Edition, October 2017, p. 38. The dangers of exces-

- sive bureaucracy are articulated by Ohio Valley, "The Yearly Meeting may organize its work through the appointment of committees necessary for the effective carrying out of its concerns. It is cautioned against becoming over-organized and thus expending in merely maintaining a mechanical system, energies which should be conserved for the advancement of truth." This clear reminder would be welcome elsewhere as well.
- 24 Christie Duncan-Tessmer, General Secretary, oral report to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, July 2017.
  - 25 Indiana YM, *Faith & Practice of Indiana Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, 2011, p. 84.
  - 26 INYM, p. 107; EFCMAYM, p. 58; NEYM, p. 106; NYYM, p.58; North Carolina YM (FUM), *Faith and Practice: Book of Discipline, North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends*, 2012, p. 105; OYM, p. 4-5, PacYM, p. 181.
  - 27 North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), "Introduction." *Faith and Practice: Book of Discipline*, 1983.
  - 28 PhYM, p.82.
  - 29 NWYM, p. 29; OYM, p. 17; BYM, p. 234.
  - 30 Niebuhr, *Social Sources of Denominationalism*, p. 21.
  - 31 Romans, 7:15-20, Ephesians 4.
  - 32 PacYM, p.ix. The preface quotes Britain YM from 1995, "We, like every generation, must find the Light and Life again for ourselves. Only what we have valued and truly made our own, not by assertion but by lives of faithful commitment, can we hand on to the future. Even then, we must humbly acknowledge that our vision of the truth will, again and again, be amended."
  - 33 Douglas Gwyn, "Enacting Truth: The Dynamics of Quaker Practice," in Jeffrey Dudiak, ed., *Befriending Truth: Quaker Perspectives*. Quakers and the Disciplines, vol. 2, Philadelphia: Friends Association for Higher Education, 2015, p. 159. Gwyn argues that "the global economy engenders constantly shifting, multicultural perspectives that prove exhilarating to some and disturbingly disorienting to others. These responses play out in religious life. The reactionary faith and politics of the religious right and the free-flowing eclecticism of liberal religion are two sides of the same tradable currency."
  - 34 INYM, p. 12.
  - 35 EFCMAYM, p. 40; Central YM, *Declaration of Faith and Discipline for Central Yearly Meeting of Friends*, 1960, p. 5.
  - 36 New Association of Friends. <http://www.newassociationoffriends.org/the-origins-of-our-yearly-meeting/>. Accessed 11/13/17.
  - 37 Other questions include: Is this consistent with historical Quaker practice? Is this truly different from George Fox's initial purpose for the establishment of yearly meetings? What about bringing people out of their light, chaffy minds, leading them to the feet of their Inward Teacher, and leaving them there? What are the different understandings of the authority of Yearly Meetings over or between Monthly Meetings? How do yearly meetings differ in their capacity to perform the duties and enforce the order specified in the Faith & Practice? Why are we always in conflict about something? What function does the internecine conflict serve? Is this uniquely Quaker? Is this not the true and proper purpose of all religious endeavors? Will the yearly meeting model hold up in a postmodern era? Can we survive the diversity and still call ourselves one denomination?
  - 38 Gwyn, "Enacting Truth," p. 153.