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## Friends General Conference

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# FRIENDS GENERAL CONFERENCE

THOMAS SWAIN

*Tomorrow Will Be Here Soon Enough!*

*(Hick's View for Liberal Quakers)*

In 1974, Pendle Hill published John Yungblut's pamphlet called "Quakerism of the Future: Mystical, Prophetic, and Evangelical." John said as he began his lecture:

"I am not here casting myself in the role of clairvoyant and predicting that the Quakerism of the future will be mystical, prophetic, and evangelical. I am doing something even more presumptuous: I am saying that in my judgment the only Quakerism that can survive in the future will have to be mystical, prophetic, and evangelical. These are the qualities that...are the very best elements in our tradition. They constitute what, it seems to me, we should want to survive." (Yungblut, p. 3)

I agree with John Yungblut that these three elements — mystical, prophetic, and evangelical — have been the best elements in our 300 years plus of Quaker practice. If we hold to them, they would do well to serve us into the future. My intentions in this presentation are to see whether these three elements might be visible in our present practices. My methodology here is personal and reflective. My "case study" is based primarily from my perceptions and observations of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

## WHERE ARE WE?

Liberal Friends can easily be identified as those Quakers who are experiential. The most visible sign of a liberal Friend is seen in the "unprogrammed" nature of their worship. Their form is to gather in a group and sit in silent waiting for a prompting to share in vocal ministry. Liberal Friends carry a concern for justice and equality in the world that generally is carried out with direct social actions through interventions and challenges to the world. Rationality is often the *modus operandi* growing out of consensus. There is a belief that Spirit

adds to this work that is defined out of the broad and diverse beliefs tolerated within the Quaker community.

There are two other sources I want to lift up that parallel these comments and add to this information about who liberal Friends are

One source is from Patricia Finley, the Clerk of our Peace and Concerns Standing Committee. She made these comments in a presentation to Baltimore Yearly Meeting last year. Pat presented this analysis about our Spiritual Strengths. We are known for our

- Faithful good work among many Friends
- Historic countercultural credentials
- Moral capital
- A spiritual process much needed in the world
- Ability to articulate effective, arguments, for peace, justice, equality, and stewardship of the earth
- We are small but powerful
- At our best we have incredible spiritual strength (Finley, 2009)

The second source is from Pink Dandelion. In his recent book, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction*, he says liberal Friends were built on these characteristics:

1. That experience, not scripture, should be primary;
2. That faith should be relevant to the age;
3. That Friends needed to be open to new ideas;
4. That in each age, Friends would know more about the nature and will of God, a doctrine called “progressivism,” and that, as such, revelation has a chronological authority. (Dandelion, p. 65).

I think we see these characteristics exemplified among liberal Friends today.

## PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING

I hope that my focus on Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is free from images and stories you might have heard about us. I present this information from a yearly meeting who at times has been arrogant, shown violent behavior among its members, and yet believes that God’s grace can

transform us when we are ready to allow it to happen. My hope is that you might find Philadelphia Yearly Meeting not so strange after all.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting dates from 1681. We are not the first Yearly Meeting established in the colonies. Its geographical area is from the Atlantic seacoast of New Jersey and Delaware then west to the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania (a boundary that Baltimore and Philadelphia Yearly Meetings agreed to in 1790). We go from Princeton, New Jersey south to Georgetown, Delaware. This encompasses four states — southern New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, all of Delaware, and the eastern shore of Maryland — Before the Annapolis Bay Bridge was erected over the Chesapeake Bay the only easy access to the eastern shore of Maryland was through Delaware.

Here are some demographics about our Yearly Meeting. We are 11,600 members comprising approximately over 7000 families in 103 Monthly Meetings grouped into 13 Quarterly Meetings. Our median adult age is 57; our mean age is 55; there are 1,200 children under 21 years of age. If you include children, our mean age is 46.

We have a paid, professional staff of 40. Our annual budget is about \$5.5 million dollars. We raise about \$1.8 million in contributions; we receive about \$3.6 million from investments that total \$50 million. Out of that \$5.5 million annual budget, we give about \$1.7 million in grants to Quaker and non-Quaker organizations. Our largest budgeted expenditures are for employee salaries and benefits (\$2.5 million), grants to others (\$1.7 million), and rent, building maintenance and equipment (\$.5 million).

Mark Cary, a member of my Monthly Meeting, Middletown (Concord Quarter), surveyed 550 members and attenders in 10 Monthly Meeting of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 2001 and 2002. A year later, ten other Meetings were surveyed and similar findings were found. The Meetings represent a wide range of attitudes, beliefs, and practices in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and includes urban and suburban communities.

Mark says that Philadelphia Friends share some common beliefs:

- Nearly everyone believes in “that of God” in everyone
- It matters less what we believe than what we do
- There is general agreement with the Peace and social testimonies
- Friends generally believe “only I can decide what the truth is for me”

Mark indicates Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is also:

- Well educated, with 9 in 10 with a college degree and five in ten having an advanced degree,
- Nearly 8 in 10 reported being politically liberal compared to 1 in 10 being politically conservative. “Some of my friends are Republicans” can be heard in a few Quaker Meetings.
- Middle to upper middle class incomes, and white collar occupations, with few from the business or blue collar world,
- About 96% White, 2% Black, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Asian, and
- Eight in 10 are “convinced,” (i.e., not “birthright” or born into Quakerism). (Cary, p. 2)

This represents the variety of Quakers who make up Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. There are indications in this information that there are threads of mystical and prophetic strands.

## IN WHAT DIRECTION ARE WE GOING?

I am going to change tone here and offer comments that reflect a critical analysis, convey a judgment, and are subjective. I present them because my sense is that they are issues that are critical to our future. Yes, “We’ve got trouble right here in River City.”

Mark Cary points out, in his study, that Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends are less religious than the general population on traditional measures. A majority of Friends do not “believe in a God to whom one may pray in the expectation of receiving an answer” (Cary, p. 1). I wonder whether this has implications about sustaining a relational experience with God. Does it have implications for our openness to mystical experiences?

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends are ambivalent about Christianity. While there is ambivalence, a majority of PYM Friends (60%) consider themselves Christian. About 20% are uncomfortable with Friends using Christian language that includes the words “Jesus,” or “Christ”. I wonder whether this tension grows from a lack of a relational experience with the Divine or even from prior, painful church experiences. This 20% has a loud voice.

Meetings themselves vary from one another in their overall views.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends no longer agree with some traditional Quaker beliefs. Fox's statement that "God hath given every one of you a measure [of the Light], according to your ability" is an example of traditional beliefs where we vary. About 50% of those surveyed disagreed with this statement.

It might be a surprise to you that we lack a consensual understanding about peace. We say we are for "peace;" we do not have a shared understanding what peace is or what it looks like. (It's similar for the members of the Church of the Brethren). Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends are not in agreement about what peace is. As part of our Yearly Meeting's national ecumenical peace gathering in 2009 called "Heeding God's Call" we actively began promoting a handgun violence prevention strategy at a local gun shop as an integral part of our peace witness. Some Philadelphia Friends voiced that they thought that hand guns had nothing to do with peace or war. As Clerk, I received several strongly worded letters from Monthly Meetings telling us to withdraw from this witness against handguns. It was obvious from this tension that one of our intentions for supporting Heeding God's Call to build a common understanding about peace among us was right. If we have strong differences about how to witness our peace concerns, does this impact our prophetic voice?

There are a few final comments now that I want to make about contemporary liberal Friends. Patricia Finley said that we Friends do "faithful good work." There are a number of Friends who are doing good work. (1.) My observation is that we do these good works more as individuals than as a community. Does this say that we are a fragmented community?

Another consideration from reflection is that (2.) We have a deep distrust of one another. When committees make reports to the larger body, we hold back our appreciation and respect for the work they have done in our name and question and second-guess the committee's work and report. This seems like a level of distrust that concludes that no one else would do as well as I could. Another problem is that (3.) there is a complexity and a volume of communication from Quaker and external sources that overwhelms us and adds to the numbness we feel.

My conclusion is that (4.) we have failed to develop a strong collective voice because of our fragmentation, distrust, and our fears

of being overwhelmed by the complexity and proliferation of social evils and pains in our society and in our world. I sense we live with frustration of being helpless. Why haven't we been able to speak with a Quaker voice about the Israel-Palestine issues or the war in Iraq? This lack of unity grows from our (5.) inability to come to unity about who we are and what our faith calls us to be and do. Do we lack an identity? If we don't have an identity, do we exist beyond ourselves?

We have a (6.) tendency to work as individuals and hesitate to take on leadership roles. We don't trust "leaders." (7.) We are decreasing in our numbers and drawing less people to our tradition. (8.) We have difficulty in gathering often and spontaneously. Our lives are complex with responsibilities, committee meetings, and multiple projects we liberal Quakers get involved with. And, of course, we have work and family commitments we need to tender. I have seen that we sometimes reduce the quality and time for our Quaker work because of these competing commitments. (9.) We find it difficult to find volunteers and funds for emerging projects. I have a personal frustration in trying to find common time for several of our next committee meeting.

Patricia conjectures that all of these things are because of:

- No shared meaning
- No common sacred texts
- The way our culture is configured
- Generations are segregated
- We have difficulty passing on our faith and practice to others
- Like the nature of our culture we sometimes make judgments on interactions according to costs of time and money
- Communication is often one sided and overwhelming
- Consideration of the rules of discourse — Quaker Process is not always honored because many Friends are new to the Religious Society of Friends. (Finley, p. 2)

I lift these comments up as stumbling block to our future. Unless we are able to find a way to deal with these blocks, our future looks more like a club rather than a Spirit inspired group that has found a way to restore our world guided by its creator.

## HOW MIGHT WE GO?

I do not despair for the Religious Society of Friends. I know that God loves us and that the power of Christ in us can make up for our blindness and stumbling. We can ask forgiveness. I know that we are grounded in a spiritual awareness that reflects the will of the Divine.

Elias Hicks, the American folk painter, raised our hopes. When I view Edward Hicks' "The Peaceable Kingdom," I see two groups. One group shows our world in its living manifestations of its natural inhabitants: wolf and lamb, leopard with the kid, calf and young lion and fatling, cow and bear, ox, and a little child. This reveals a level of coexistence in the universe that we know could exist for us today. It shows the diversity of our world in cooperation with one another, like it might have been in the Garden of Eden.

The wolf will romp with the lamb, the leopard sleep with the kid. Calf and lion will eat from the same trough, and a little child will tend them. Cow and bear will graze the same pasture, their calves and cubs grow up together, and the lion eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens, the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent. Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill on my holy mountain. The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide. (Isaiah 11: 6)

There is second group in Hick's drawing that shows William Penn and others making a treaty with Indians. Peace comes when we work for it with one another. I wonder whether Hicks was trying to say, as George Fox discovered, that our human work is in rebuilding our world and being able to restore the Kingdom as it originally was. These words from Revelations convey that sense.

I saw Heaven and earth new-created.... I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven,.... I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: "Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people; he's their God. He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone." The Enthroned continued, "Look! I'm making everything new. (Revelation 21: 1-5)



My hope is that the future of liberal Quakers will involve a faith that has some of the dynamics expressed at a recent Monthly Meeting for Business at Middletown,

We are seeking an encounter that will transform our lives. We believe that this inward encounter with the Living Presence of Christ is available to every person. When we respond to this Presence, our “hearts of stone are transformed into hearts of flesh,” and we are taught how to better care for ourselves, for others and our world. This is the starting point for Outreach/inreach. All the actions and testimonies flow from this experience.

In my sharing about Philadelphia Friends, there are threads of those three elements Yungblut stated in his Pendle Hill pamphlet. If we allow ourselves to be Divinely guided, we can grasp the mystical, prophetic, and evangelical strands we needed to continue powerfully into our future. There is a possibility of blending these elements. Prophecy has mystical characteristics. While intentions to be evangelical are something we might turn from, would a mystical-evangelism be suitable for liberal Friends? Can we reach out to share the exciting news of transformation we find in our Meeting communities? Prophecy might be evangelical inherently if we learn collectively to listen. All of this is dependent on how well we listen and whether we act collectively. Without these things we will not be a Religious Society of Friends.

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