

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting  
**Report of the General Secretary**  
July 25, 2014

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## **Opening**

Dear Friends, it's great to be here with you this afternoon. I'm in high Quaker energy; I'm feeling the love and the power in this community; and I'm saying "Yes!"

I love our yearly meeting. I love the welcome and the warmth of our spiritual community. I love the meetings for worship and the meetings for business, the teaching and the learning, the hugs and the affection. I love the feeling that in some deep way we belong to each other, that we matter to each other and that life is deeper and richer and more meaningful because we are together, not only this week but all year around.

And the power of love is over all.

## **Transition**

Friends, my time as General Secretary is coming to an end.

August 31 will be my last day in office and for me it is a time of mixed emotions. I am sad to be leaving a job that I have loved and one that has afforded me so much fulfillment. But on the other hand, it also feels just right to be stepping down at this time. We are in a good place as a Yearly Meeting, although there are challenges ahead about which I will speak later in my talk, and now it is time for new leadership.

I could not be more pleased with the selection of my successor, Christie Duncan-Tessmer. She will be a terrific new leader in our yearly meeting, bringing fresh insights and new perspectives to the work. I am pleased that she will be able to assume leadership in a time of financial stability, with a strong staff and a more rightly sized organization. She has my blessing.

Thank you for the opportunity I have had to serve our Yearly Meeting. It has been a blessing to me.

This afternoon, I'd like to focus in two places.

First, I'd like to look back, in a spirit of celebration, at a few of the highlights of the last seven and a half years.

Second, I'd like to talk about what I see as the challenges which lie ahead of us.

## **Looking Back in A Spirit of Celebration**

As we look back, I'd like to invoke George Fox who would sometimes exclaim, "And the power of the Lord was overall."

Perhaps these are not the words that some or many of us would use today. Although these words work well for me, for this talk I want to change the phrase, in part to honor the theme of this gathering. I want to say, "The power of love was overall."

It is a paradox. As I look back over the last seven and a half years I can talk about the tempests and the potholes, but I am also bold to say, "the power of love was overall."

I have begun to think of the last seven years and a half years as falling roughly into three periods, each period having dominant concern: an early period, a middle period, and a later period.

### **The Early Period**

The early period was dominated by our renovation of Friends Center. This was a project we undertook in collaboration with our partners, the AFSC and CPMM. The construction phase took us two years and then some. The planning phase took much longer. When I took office Interim Meeting had not yet approved PYM's participation. It did so later that year when it approved Plan H. We began with projected budget of \$12.5 million and twice increased the budget to a total of \$15 million. We raised \$8 million and borrowed \$7 million. It was a sweet moment when we moved into our newly renovate space in June of 2009.

During this same period, other good things were happening.

At Interim Meeting we began the practice of inviting people to share stories of vitality and growth within our Yearly Meeting. In one sense, this may seem too small a matter to mention here, but for me it is a big thing because it makes the statement that there good things are happening in our community that deserve attention and to be celebrated even if our membership numbers don't keep abreast of our enthusiasms and good works.

We began the practice of getting all Interim Meeting and Yearly Meeting materials up on the website, with the result that we now have a complete electronic archive of Yearly Meeting materials going back to the early 2000s, easily accessible to everyone.

The Greenleaf Fund was established.

At the Arch Street Meeting House we hosted a major conference: “Heeding God’s Call: A Gathering on Peace.” This was a most successful, week-long gathering sponsored by PYM, the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonite Church, USA. It had a major impact on many of us and I am still in the energy of it.

We launched PYM Today, our new Yearly Meeting magazine to take the place of PYM News.

And we began to deal with a challenging financial situation as we prepared the FY 2010 budget, planning for the downsizing of staff.

### **The Middle Period**

The middle period came to be dominated by our financial crisis.

At summer sessions in 2010 and 2011 our treasurer reported substantial General Fund deficits and in the fall of 2011 Financial Stewardship began to grapple with the fact that we that we had a crisis on our hands.

Eight months later, by June of 2012, after an extraordinary amount of hard work on the part of many people, plans were in place to resolve the financial crisis and a month later a balanced and sustainable three year budget was presented to the Yearly Meeting and approved.

Unhappily, over a period of two years, it was necessary to reduce our staff to its present level of 20 FTE’s.

During this same period, other things were happening:

The William Penn Lecture was revived.

The administration of the Friends Education Fund was moved to Friends Council on Education

The establishment of the Arch Street Meeting House Preservation Trust was approved.

We launched the first edition of PYM Today Online.

I had the opportunity to attend the 6<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Friends in Kenya with my partner and wife, Nancy van Arkel, also an appointed PYM delegate.

The first Thread Letter and first Thread Gathering were launched.

## **The Later Period**

The later period of our recent history began to emerge after annual sessions in 2012, two years ago, and continues to this day. For me it has been characterized by a process of finding a “new normal” and gestating a long range plan.

In the summer of 2012, two years ago, we were just emerging from a financial crisis, but in my report to the Yearly Meeting a year later, I was able to list seventeen positive events that had occurred during the course of the year and I made the observation, “a persistent feeling of unsettledness and stress which had been a hovering cloud for several years had dissipated.”

At the end of my 2013 report last year, I suggested that we were in the process of finding our way to a new equilibrium with a smaller staff and with fewer resources, but with a strong sense that we were now more rightly sized and that we could sustain ourselves at our present levels.

Other things are worthy of mention.

Our new website was launched and has been very favorably received.

A break-through occurred in resolving a log jam with respect to operations at the Burlington Meeting House and Conference Center

I was able to attend Britain Yearly Meeting, in session, in May of 2013.

We have a brand new PYM Directory, some six months in the making.

And Christie Duncan-Tessmer was chosen to be our new General Secretary.

In summary, we've done a lot over this period of time.

Our staff is strong. Our programs are in good shape. I am grateful that the Arch Street Meeting House Preservation Trust is up and running and that the Friends who are managing the Burlington Meeting House and Conference Center are operating successfully. We have turned our financial situation around.

And the power of love was over all.

## **Challenges**

I now want to move into the second part of my talk. We have much to celebrate, but we also face challenges and my report would not be complete or balanced without including them as well.

These are the sobering facts which underlie the challenges ahead of us:

Both our stated membership and our attendance at meetings for worship have declined.

Our financial support from monthly meeting covenant contributions is down, as is the annual fund.

I'd like to take a minute to deal with each of these data points.

## **Membership**

When talking about membership, I will be using adult membership numbers and the most current numbers which are for the year ending December 31, 2013.

Since 1955, the year when the Hicksite and Orthodox yearly meetings reunited, there has been a substantial decline in our membership, mirroring the decline in other religious bodies, but that decline, although it still persists, has now substantially leveled off.

In 1955 we had 13,100 adult members. Today, we have 9400, a decline of 3,700 or 28%.

Over the last 15 years, however, since 1998 when we last reorganized, we have lost only 100 adult members or 1.1%. The bad news is that there has been a decline. The good news is that in the most recent 15 years, that rate of decline has substantially flattened out.

## **Attendance at meetings for worship**

Over the last nine years our Meeting Enrichment Services Working Group has done a once every three year survey of those attending a meetinghouse on a Sunday in April, whether for worship, for business, religious education or otherwise. The last survey was done in 2013. The idea is that these numbers may give us a better idea of our health than our membership numbers.

In the nine year period, 2004 to 2013, there was 10% decline in adult attendance. The decline was a total of 300, from 3,000 in 2004 down to 2,700 in 2013. There was an even greater decline in the number of young people attending over the same period of time, 21%.

Another piece of information uncovered by Meeting Enrichment Services is that over the same 9 year period, ending 2013, 35 meetings had an increase in attendance, but 63 meetings had a decrease. For 7 meetings attendance remained constant.

## **The Covenant and the Annual Fund**

Our monthly meeting covenant income is down. For the last three years it has been budgeted at \$1.25 million, Last year we came in under budget by \$17,000 and this year we expect to be under budget by \$40,000.

This year our Annual Fund income is also down. We have taken in \$30,000 less than we did last year.

We're okay for now, Friends. The stock market is up, we've been able to save on our expenses and we've taken in small amounts of unexpected income. We've had modest surpluses for the last two years and we expect a modest surplus this year. We have been able to begin restoring our reserves. I am not sounding a short term alarm. But it is a longer term alarm. The mathematics is very simple. Normal inflationary pressures will cause our expenses to rise between 2% to 3%, and if our revenues do not rise by a commensurate amount, or if they decline as they have been doing, in the end, we will not be able sustain our current level of operations.

Sometimes I feel gloomy about the numbers. But then I remind myself, "the power of love is over all," and I am able to let go.

It is not our calling to indulge gloominess. Our job is to be faithful to the best that is in us and then to let go.

When I teach Friends decision-making, I talk about what makes for good participation on the part of individuals in the meeting.

In a meeting for business, or in any Quaker context, our job is to speak and then to release; to speak and to let go. In Quaker practice, unlike in other decision-making models, the releasing is as important as the speaking. It is when we release that we open the space Spirit to move among us, either in the silence or in the contributions of others. Quaker decision-making will not work if releasing doesn't happen.

It is the same with our life together as Quakers. Our job is to be faithful to the best that we can do, even when things seem gloomy, and then to release the outcomes to God and Spirit.

We have no idea what God has in store for his people called Quakers. It may be that our time as Quakers in our present form will run out. It may be that our membership and our financial capabilities will continue to slowly erode, dwindling over time, and eventually come to an end. It may be, however, that there will arise among us someone, or many, whose light shines so brightly, whose groundedness in spirit is so deep, and whose charisma is so compelling that we will experience a reawakening and by God's grace find new ways to think about our faith and practice, discovering new ways to serve God and humankind, attracting new seekers to us. It may be that there will be a less dramatic turnaround and we will find ourselves in new circumstances almost without knowing how it happened.

We don't know what will come. Our job is to be faithful to what we know and to the best that we can do; our job is to release all of our labors to God and to Spirit and to Love, and then our job is to welcome life on its own terms, whatever it brings us. It is in this place that we will know peace.

And the power of love is over all.

## Conclusion

Dear Friends I have come to the end of my talk.

I have wanted not only to celebrate some of the seven and a half years we've traveled together, but also to call attention to some things that I think should cause us concern.

Again, I say thank you for the opportunity I have had to participate in this work. It is work that many have accomplished but about which I have the privilege to speak.

I have been grateful for the leadership and support of the two clerks under whom I have served: Thomas Swain and Jada Jackson, each of them has given huge amounts of time in service to our Yearly Meeting and to each of whom we owe a debt of thanks.

I am grateful for the PYM staff with whom I've had the opportunity to work and for the many ways they support the work and vitality of our yearly meeting.

The title of the Long Range Plan which we will consider tomorrow is "Re-kindling Our Fire." I'd like to close with the vision which is a part of that Plan:

"We envision a vital and growing Philadelphia Yearly Meeting- a faith community committed to deepening spiritually, welcoming newcomers, building supportive and inclusive community, and providing loving service and faithful witness to the world."

I unite with this vision and it is my hope is that we will all be able to unite with it and with the long range plan of which it is a part.

I want to be part of re-kindling our fire.

I'm saying "Yes! Let's do this together."

Together, let us recommit to the work of rekindling the fires of Quakerism.

And the power of love is over all.

Arthur M. Larrabee, General Secretary  
July 25, 2014