



# Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *of the Religious Society of Friends*

## **NOTES from PYM Threshing Session on the Burlington Meeting House & Conference Center**

Sunday, March 9, 2008, 1:30 pm – 5:30pm  
Facilitator: Gretchen Castle

### **1:30 PM Opening Worship**

The meeting began at the appointed time with a period of silent worship.

### **1:40 PM Opening Remarks** (*Arthur Larrabee, General Secretary of PYM*)

The General Secretary greeted all assembled and expressed his gratitude for the excellent turn out, estimated to be close to 100 Friends. This meeting was requested by, and is under the care of, the General Services Standing Committee (GSSC). GSSC has oversight responsibility for three properties belonging to PYM, Burlington Meeting House (BMH), Arch Street Meeting House and Friends Center. Burlington Meeting House Services Working Group (BWG) meets monthly and advises GSSC and PYM. Bill Daley is the clerk of BWG.

The General Secretary defined two perceptions that were present in all the comments made to him about BMH: (1) BMH was not being used as frequently as anticipated over a decade ago, when the endowment fund was established and extensive renovations were completed to create dedicated space for younger Friends, and (2) Friends had a notion that BMH would be financially self sustaining, but clearly BMH was requiring more and more financial support from PYM. It seemed that the issues of attendance and upkeep had never been investigated with an eye toward identifying root causes and proposing solutions. When the former director of BMH took another job several months ago, an opportunity to explore and investigate was opened to us. It is of utmost importance that we unify on the future of BMH before we forge ahead and hire a new full time director. GSSC agreed with the General Secretary that a threshing session would be rightly ordered and directed our General Secretary to convene today's meeting, whereby members of GSSC could attend in a listening mode. Jack Walz was introduced as the current interim director of BMH.

### **1:50 PM Framing the Threshing Session** (Gretchen Castle, Facilitator)

#### **Purpose of the Threshing Session:**

1. The purpose of the threshing session is to consider whether the Burlington Meeting House and Conference Center is (or can become) a viable program of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and whether those attending would recommend affirming Yearly Meeting's support for it into the future.
2. The threshing session will also consider the options for moving forward if those attending are not able to affirm support for the Center.

3. The results of the threshing session will be forwarded to General Services Standing Committee for further consideration and action by that committee.

The agenda and related documents had been mailed to sixty Friends who had contacted the office of the GS indicating their intent to attend. Walk-ins were provided with the same information when they arrived. We are here today to offer guidance for GSSC. The facilitator committed to keep the conversation flowing and try to stay on schedule so we could conclude by 5:30 PM.

**2:15 PM Original Vision** (*John Caughey*)

The 1992 original mission of the Conference Center was read. It was recalled that there were many youngsters and young adults in the balcony during the Yearly Meeting Sessions in which they decided to move forward with the Conference Center. An ad hoc committee was formed in 1988 and charged with the responsibility of exploring the need for a facility that might be used primarily by our youth. The ad hoc committee quickly united on the need, but it took more time to unite on a location. Way opened in 1991 when Burlington MM was laid down. The BMH property had been on the list of possible sites since 1988. The committee quickly united on BMH as a rightly ordered location. It was a facility rich in Quaker history, going back to 1677 and well located geographically. A \$2.6 million campaign was launched to provide for (1) renovations and an addition suitable for group meetings, including a kitchen, and (2) an endowment fund to cover 2/3rds of the cost of maintaining BMH. Friends discerned that the project was not a burden and that management would be shared between PYM and Burlington Quarter, and that BMH would have a caretaker. Westtown was chosen as a back-up location. The Yearly Meeting approved all of the proposed minutes (excerpts read today).

**2:30 PM Current Use of the Facility** (*Elizabeth Walmsley, Middle School Friends Coordinator; Cookie Caldwell, Young Friends Coordinator; Sadie Forsythe, Young Adult Friends Coordinator*)

Elizabeth Walmsley, Middle School Friends coordinator reported next. She often uses BMH for retreats for Middle School Friends. She likes BMH because it makes her life easier. It is a central location. It is convenient. She stores all the MSF materials on the third floor.

Cookie Caldwell already has the place well marked. It is a dedicated space. The children love playing games along the river. Adult Friendly Presence volunteers like it because there are bunks and showers. At most Monthly Meetings you sleep on the floor because there are no beds. At best there may be one shower. The kitchen at BMH is a great asset with a dishwasher and lots of counter space.

There is little need for modifications from the Middle School Friend's perspective. Having one floor for boys and one for girls is wonderful. The building's proximity to public transportation is great.

Elizabeth was asked to use BMH as much as possible. The main reason Middle School Friends do not use it more is that there are certain PYM Events that PYM wants children of Friends to be at, which are not near BMH. These include PYM events at 4<sup>th</sup> and Arch, Camp Swatara in May, and Summer Sessions. Middle School Friends is essentially limited to weekends Halloween, Christmas and winter.

A Friend asked; "I understand you were requested to use BMH. Was there a time when Middle School Friends students used mostly monthly meetings?" Elizabeth responded: "There are pros and cons to staying at a monthly meeting. The pros are that we do more outreach if we travel around to Monthly Meetings. Monthly Meetings with no youngsters love the vitality of having Middle School Friends visit. Outreach is key to our growth and vitality. It can be heavy lifting but it can also be very gratifying. The cons though, are having to travel out to the meeting, lift and transport all the program materials, sleep on the floor, no showers, and needing to fit in with the schedule of the monthly meeting on the Sunday morning. And that's what makes Burlington so great."

Another Friend asked if the ten or twenty dollar fee was reasonable? Elizabeth responded that Middle School Friends pay a \$65 fixed fee for a weekend; only \$6 goes to Burlington. They could give more than \$6 to BMH

Another Friend asked why was Arts Camp laid down? Elizabeth responded that Summer Sessions are at the end of July and Arts Camp was the third week in August. It was too much work to organize both.

Cookie Caldwell, the Young Friends Coordinator presented next. Young Friends experience with BMH has been great. They have awesome talent shows in the theatre. The basement is good for "sloppy" arts program. The kitchen makes a huge difference. Very few Monthly Meeting kitchens would pass health code inspections, whereas the BMH kitchen is kept clean. Cookie also appreciates the beds and showers, which makes it easier to recruit Friendly Adult Presences. The kids sleep better at night when they have a bed. Cookie reported that BMH meets the needs of Young Friends and that they utilize all spaces in the building.

Cookie reported, "Other venues choose us. PYM invites us to Philly. We went to Germantown MM and engaged in urban survival skills and that was a good thing. Buses, subways all new experiences for many of our MS kids. Caln Quarter invites us each May to camp at Camp Swatara, which is about 20 miles east of Harrisburg. Now we are turning kids away who want to go there. Camp Swatara promotes outreach because it is in western part of PYM." Young Friends still use Camp Onas and have for more than 30 years. It is a totally different experience than being at BMH. Bucks Quarter Monthly Meeting used to do a peace fair. Young Friends were stage hands and helped run it on Saturday. They interacted with people who are part of the peace program. Cookie has tried to have a fall gathering around Thanksgiving at BMH, but that has never been successful. He will probably not increase Young Friends use of BMH because his staff time is totally consumed by the current schedule

A Friend suggests increasing the percentage of fee that goes to BMH. Young Friends pay \$70 for a weekend, and only \$6 per night goes to BMH. They underutilize the many scholarships available for youth. Using that money could free-up money for BMH.

A Friend stated that became a Quaker when the building first started catering to young Friends and feels a need to be more involved and lend her energy at this time. She hopes that before we put a larger financial burden on our kids, we can get money from outside groups.

A Friend asked Cookie and Elizabeth if having a congregation worshipping at BMH on Sunday morning would interfere with their programs. Cookie and Elizabeth agreed that this would interfere and would not work.

Jack Walz, the Interim Director of BMH reported that there is a group that comes on Sunday evening. He sees several religious groups using the building regularly. This is good for income but it causes him an aching wish that more Quakers would use the facility more frequently.

Sadie Forsythe, the Young Adult Friends Coordinator presented next. She started at PYM in December as coordinator for young adults (18 - 35). Her predecessor was almost too successful in coordinating a Young Adult Friends conference at BMH in February, 2007. All beds were filled and some Friends slept on the floor. It was important to meet in a very old Meetinghouse, adding depth to our worship experience. Public transportation makes it more possible to use this location. BMH is a place that people want to return to; it is full of good memories of fun times spent with friends. Lots of now older Friends have fond memories and attachments, especially from Cookie Caldwell's Young Friends program at BMH. Sadie's vision is that there would be more weekend activities here as she stays in her position. She is currently planning for a spring meeting in Indiana. When it is over she can devote more energy to local events.

**3:00 PM Operating Income & Expenses (FY 2001 – FY 2009)** (*Kathy Reily, PYM Director of Finance; Bill Daly, Clerk of Burlington Meeting House Services Working Group*)

Kathy directed all to look at the green sheet included in the handouts. Facility fees go all the way across the page. Some of that data are misleading because they do not reflect only user fees. Those numbers include internal transfers. The fees have not increased, yet endowment income has dropped and expenses are way up in (1) Personnel and (2) Property and Equipment. In 1994, personnel costs were \$30,500. That salary has essentially doubled and benefits have increased 74 % since 1994; mostly due to health care.

We started with one full time equivalent (FTE). Along the way, personnel costs were restructured so that 20% of pay and benefits were carried by GSSC. Then it shifted away from GSSC and that 20% has evaporated, as GSSC found itself having to do more and more. In 1994 utilities were \$36,000; today they are at \$65,000.

Rental fees have not kept pace with increasing operating costs. Burlington received two special grants, \$20,000 from Bequests and \$4,000 from Tyson. They were for special projects, not for salary or routine expenses. Kathy pointed out the bar graph; notice in FY 01 income and expenses were very close. Over time the bar graph shows the imbalance we are talking about today. Of all the funds that can be used **only for BMH**, four are restricted and one is designated. Only the designated fund can be directed elsewhere by PYM. The restricted funds were all established during the fund raising for Burlington in the mid 1990's for an endowment goal of one million dollars. Two funds are under control of Burlington Quarter. The George Deacon Fund is handled by FOWG.

Donations brought the endowment up to \$1,000,000 in 1999, but since then market values of the stocks in the Burlington Endowment Fund lost value. That resulted in less dividends and/or interest income on those investments. The "worth" of the fund has

dropped from one million. Our story is the story of the Wall Street, and the stock market, over the last eight years.

A Friend asked If we are short \$47,000, are we not within the 2/3 (BMH) to 1/3 (PYM) ratio cost of operating the building?

Another Friend asked “Are we are at the mercy of the endowment?” “Do I understand the income for this facility is in jeopardy because of the stock market?” This was affirmed.

A Friend asked if a 1% transfer had been authorized at Summer Sessions last summer. That is correct, Kathy Reily responded. For FY 09 that 1% has been taken off the top and put into the General Fund.

A Friend noted that the numbers from 01 to 04 showed a problem emerging, and asked why we did not start addressing the deficit then?

Jed Smith, Co Clerk of GSSC said BWG and GSSC both hoped that it would turn around. He reported that GSSC felt a more forceful director was needed. They talked about a business plan to be developed. They urged that fees be raised significantly for non Quakers for Friends. They recognized that usage by young friends has peaked and declined. Attempts to bring them back to the place dedicated to their needs did not work. GSSC inspected BMH when they used it for a retreat in August.

Bill Daly, clerk of BWG reported that endowment income is off significantly. If that disparity was not there we would be all be someone else today instead of at this threshing session. We are at the mercy of the stock market. Much of the endowment is invested in NASDAQ stocks and bonds and not bubble stocks. Interest income has been sacrificed over the last few years and the Fed is lowering interest rates because the economy is deemed to be in such trouble. We own assets. We are not traders on the stock market. We are stewards of our assets. We have problems in the programmatic side.

A Friend asked about the increase in income starting in 2004. This resulted from \$20,000 from Bequests and \$4,000 from Tyson.

Bill Daly asked Friends to look at the lavender sheet included in the handout. As background, Friends should realize that in 2004 PYM beefed up our capital projects. Edward Woolman bequeathed PYM a substantial amount of money for capital projects. That fund is now at \$700,000. It should not run out for 10 to 15 years. PYM puts \$35,000 into this savings fund each year.

Bill gave an overview of current BMH capital projects. The BWG is dealing with mold remediation HVAC issues. They decided to install a French drain to help reduce humidity in the basement so the mold would not come back. BMH has a part time janitor. He needs help so an outside firm is being hired. The HVAC units outside will need to be replaced in a year or two. BMH needs lights in the graveyard for safety and security. There is a water run-off problem on one outside wall, which adds to the basement mold problem. The wall around the graveyard is a perfect example of dueling inspectors. It is 200 years old. We were required to take it down by the township, but the historical society in Burlington said we need to restore it. It has to be repaired to confirm

to 18<sup>th</sup> century style. We have made some repairs on Wood Street but it is already bulging. The maintenance of the wall is a very large expense.

The General Secretary asked Friends to look at the Occupancy Report on white paper. The overall trend was down over the years.

We next looked at the rate info sheet on beige paper. The fees are as follows: \$6 a night for youngsters; \$16 for Quaker related; and \$26 non Quakers, plus day rates, weekend rates and other listings for rental of certain rooms and the kitchen, etc.

A Friend asked if the fees are too high or too low? Compared to commercial rates they are very low.

A Friend pointed out that the heaviest use is on the weekends. One thing that might be improved is having community groups use it more during the week.

Another Friend asked why rates are so low. Bill Daly responded that fees were raised one dollar last year. BMH operates not as a business, but as a retreat center for Quakers.

One Friend suggested we should rethink our mission and operate it as a business.

### **3:30 PM Small Groups**

After a short break Friends met in small groups. There were five groups of between 12 to 20 friends.

### **4:00 PM Plenary Session:**

The group gathered to continue plenary sessions *keeping in mind the following:*

- Original vision;
- PYM program use of facility;
- Operating costs;
- Future Capital needs;
- Other PYM needs;
- The intangible or spiritual value of the facility and its programs; and
- Other possibilities for the use of the facility.

*What advice do we have for the General Services Standing Committee as they consider how to plan for the right use/stewardship of the facility?*

First, Friends responded to the question, "What do we like about BMH?" Friends responded with the following points: (1) good location; (2) Quaker history and local history - BMH is the crown jewel in an historic area. When walks out of the Meetinghouse they enter a community that retains much of the architecture from hundreds of years ago. Walking the graveyard reinforces the sense of history; one can read and touch the ancient markers; (3) quality of programs; (4) easy access to public transportation; (5) it is "home" for middle school children; (6) low cost to participants; (7) beds and showers; (8) the Delaware River offers many attractions/activities; (10) excellent and big kitchen; (11) it reaffirms our commitment to be visible and active in a depressed urban area; (12) it is a testament to our wisdom in 1992 to establish its current mission; (13) BMH is one of the first places for any religious group (in 1688) to

discuss abolition of slavery; (14) there is something very special, a spiritual ambience when worshipping in an historic meetinghouse; (15) it is a safe place for our kids to be; (16) two floors for the beds; one for boys and one for girls; (20) BMH is toddler and infant friendly and is compliant with the requirements of the American with Disabilities Act; (21) it is adult friendly in the sense that it is easier to recruit adult Friendly presence volunteers because of the showers and beds, instead of sleeping on the floor and very limited bathroom amenities in many local Meetinghouses; (22) integration of the facility with the surrounding community which has many restaurants, shops and services; (23) the location enhances New Jersey's presence in PYM; (24) it is a place where we can invite peace groups and other groups that share Quaker values and leadings.

The facilitator next asked Friends to share their concerns. The responses were as follows: (1) scarce finances, financial stewardship and a drain on PYM's budget; (2) a lack of unity around the facility; (3) the mission statement needs to be linked to a sustainable business model; (4) there is hardly any marketing, outreach or publicity; (5) a concern that under the current fee structure it would be impossible to generate sufficient revenue even if the building was filled week days and weekends; (6) concern about inconsistency in prices, a lack of transparency in pricing, and that the fee information is confusing and poorly publicized; (7) the tension of finding money to support our leadings, business and mission (faith) are inextricably linked, can we think of business ways to support our faith?; (8) The website is lacking – does not convey relationship to community, needs to convey a better sense of hospitality, list prices, etc.; (9) the yearly needs to clearly convey its support for BMH and publicize the positive, BMH is not merely a drain on our resources. It is a needed facility as it states in the mission. Friends fail to grasp that this facility is doing what it was supposed to do with 2/3 and 1/3 ratio of income vs. PYM subsidy. The expenses we incur are incurred in keeping our mission alive; keeping BMH vital is not a business; (11) the endowment is not large enough to generate enough income to meet the 2/3 formula; (12) we are developing Quakers of the future, and if we close this down we are mortgaging the future of the Religious Society of Friends; (13) BMH is not integrated enough with the yearly meeting, the yearly meeting needs to work to integrate it. Monthly meetings do not use it enough; (14) the new director should have marketing and fund raising skill sets instead of program development; (15) concern about the misconception that BMH should be self-sustaining when in fact the plan from the beginning has been that 1/3 of funds would come from the yearly meeting; (16) one Friend said he has a very large concern about the brick wall, which is estimated to cost at least \$250,000 to repair over three or four years. We are caught in a Catch 22 situation where the local authorities say we must tear it down and the historical commission says it must be repair the wall in the style of the era in which it was initially constructed. We need to explore the consequences of tearing it down, which is the less expensive route; (16) We are a volunteer organization and that limits what we can do. There is a lack of support once projects are launched;

Friends considered the following spiritual and intangible aspects of the building: (1) BMH is a spiritual home to Quakers; (2) it has a spiritual mission of nurturing Quaker youth and Quaker identity. Quaker youth programs create lifelong Quakers involved in the community; (3) it is a platform for Quaker advancement in New Jersey

Friends made the following suggestions:

(1) Hire a business oriented Director who is in tune with Spirit and focused on financial development; program development would be secondary; (2) fund development and education; (3) reaching out to monthly meetings and quarterly meetings, make them

aware of BMH's mission and encourage them to do strategic planning and workshops at BMH; (4) reach out to young people beyond PYM; (5) continue visioning to discern whether we are behind this 100%; (6) publicize the success of Young and Middle School Friends events through website reports and by taking Young and Middle School Friends out to monthly meetings to rave about their experience; (7) report to Yearly Meeting at sessions that BMH has been fulfilling its mission and did generate the endowment (halfway there at least); (8) fundraise to double the endowment. It was decided to stop fund raising in 2000. We only get \$2,000 a year from donations for Burlington; at a five percent return on investment (which is common in the current market) it would require \$2,000,000 in the endowment fund to meet budget needs at a 2/3 level; (9) PYM needs to clearly articulate its support of this facility. When Friends articulated support for Friends Center, dollars followed. The same should happen if we make the mission of BMH a priority; (9) we must ask ourselves. "What contribution can I make?" Our leadings birth how we can take a leadership role. Everyone leads in one or more ways. Small contributions of time, money and labor, all present us with opportunities for leadership. How many religious groups have the "problem" of what to do with such a majestic building? A building that offers history and modern meeting amenities? Finding ways to use the building among Friends and the Burlington community should be a joyful task; (10) work camps could "camp" here; (11) build BMH to serve the friends of Young Friends who are between 18 and 35; (12) Offer weekend workshops on Integrity, Equality, etc.; (13) post a calendar on the website to show where the vacant weekends (and weekdays) are. That coupled with posting the fee schedule will help prospective users make informed choices; (14) if Friends participate in the spiritual ambience of this historic building, they will want to give money. Let us not put out a note of desperation; but a note of vitality and growth;

The facilitator said: "Let me test Friends on my sense that there is a lot of energy here today to go forward with plans to revitalize BMH and its mission; and what we next might need would be a visioning gathering." There was an overwhelming affirmation of the facilitator's sense. The facilitator then asked if we are prepared to support BMH if it is not self sustaining, and where do other standing committees weigh in helping to make this happen? Bill Daly, clerk of BWG repeated a request he made a year ago to have an ad hoc committee consisting of Friends from education, worship and GSSC folks to carry this forth.

Friends offered the following affirmations: One Friend said he loves the leadership of young Friends (18 – 35) and I he felt heartened by the vitality and support of older Friends. He said he could feel the challenge of leadership being met. Another friend sad he was grateful that he his two grown kids are still active Quakers. He attributed this in a large part to their involvement in Young Friends activities including ones at BMH

The General Secretary circulated a sign up sheet and asked those who want to be part of future planning to so indicate with a check mark. He said he will be happy to report to IM that the flag of many spectacular programs flies high, along with a sense that the flag of financial support seems to be at half mast. The ancient brick wall that surrounds BMH has to be improved or removed. We need to "grow" the value of the endowment fund for BMH and add a little extra for the physical plant. Timing seems good. We have a good story to tell.

A Friend spoke of leaders in the past generations of Quakers, some of whom prayed with the pope, sultans, czars and presidents. Joseph Taylor is buried in the graveyard at BMH. Our younger Friends need to be more conscious of Quaker history.

The facilitator asked Richard Morse, co clerk of GSSC, if he wanted to speak. Richard said he would love to see more Quarters and Monthly Meetings use BMH on an annual basis. He challenged Friends who were present to bear witness to their enthusiasm to forge ahead and make a financial contribution. A member of the BWG asked Friends who fancy themselves skilled at finance and property management to please consider joining the 4 to 6 Friends on BWG, who get together on the fourth Monday of each month. The BWG focuses on property maintenance and financial issues, not on programming or visioning.

**Wrap up and Closing Worship.** The facilitator led us in worship by sharing a message about joy. The meeting was adjourned at 5:10.

Respectfully submitted,

Don Owen  
Harrisburg MM  
Member of GSSC and its recording secretary