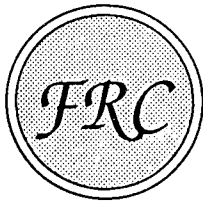


PASTORAL CARE NEWSLETTER



PUBLISHED BY THE FAMILY RELATIONS COMMITTEE
OF PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING

*For Overseers, Members of Ministry and Counsel, and others involved
in pastoral care and counseling*

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Inactive Members: Keeping Some and Helping Others Move On

by Sue Heath



Sue Heath

"Dear Friends: I received your letter about membership, and I want to remain part of Moorestown Meeting. My wife and I have lived here [in distant state] for twenty years and we have joined the Presbyterian Church. All our financial support goes to them, which is why I have been unable to contribute to Moorestown. But both my parents were members of the Meeting, they and my grandparents are buried in the Mt. Laurel graveyard, and I will always consider myself a Quaker. I want to remain a member."

"I spoke with X, who lives just outside town, and told her we had missed seeing her in meeting. She said that her work has been

demanding, her children growing up, and as a single parent she just doesn't have time. She told me how much meeting meant to her when she first came to this area, and that she was sure she would be back when her life slowed down a little. I told her she could always come back to meeting then, but now, we were trying to revitalize our membership. Since she had not attended or given any support to the meeting for such a long time, we wanted to help her to reconsider remaining on our list. She was not comfortable with that, but I will talk to her again and see if her feelings have changed."

These vignettes paraphrase some of the answers Friends have received in the past few years as Moorestown Meeting has struggled to strengthen its membership list. Perhaps other meetings will find them familiar! Friends find it so very hard to release members, to help them move along, or to clarify the status of longtime inactive members. As an ex-officio member of the Overseers at Moorestown Meeting for ten years, I have watched Friends struggle long and nobly with this dilemma, trying first one remedy and then another. In those ten years, our membership has shrunk by over 100 members,

about 20% of our total, even though we have steadily gained 10- 20 new members each year.

Participation is the Key

Our meeting has struggled to define membership for ourselves, and to define the participation required of a member. As we strive for a committed, participating, religious society, we have intentionally and deliberately worked to remove from our rolls those whose membership no longer seems meaningful to them. During the dialogue, absent Friends are told what is needed from members. They have a chance to discuss their concept of membership with the Overseer who contacts them, and to hear the meeting's side. Finally, some resign, some transfer to a closer meeting or to another church, some are released and some become more active in meeting. Distant Friends begin to communicate, maybe just with a yearly letter, to visit meeting when they are in the area, and to increase their financial support.

Steps We Go Through Before Recommending Release

Releasing Friends is the hardest. Over the years, a long sequence of communications has led to a periodic list of Friends that Overseers recommend for release, and following Meeting for Business, members sometimes continue the process of trying to contact the inactive Friends and bring them back into the meeting community. Even when it is obvious that the inactive members do not want to be contacted, when they ignore letters and messages on their answering machines, it is hard to let go. We hear stories about times in the past when that member was very active in meeting, or the time when the person in

question came to a funeral and told how much he or she misses meeting. Or we may hear about an encounter with the absent one at a Quaker function somewhere. Friends truly grasp at straws to prove to themselves and others that the person really wants to be a Friend. Each Friend seems to take it personally that this person is being let go, and turned loose into a hostile world! At that time, the Overseers who have been working with the particular Friend need to step in, both to review the steps that have been taken before release was recommended and to help the meeting accept the loss.

In Moorestown, the first alert comes from the Friend responsible for receiving contributions. That person informs a small membership committee when a member has not made any reply to appeal letters for three years. Friends inquire discreetly as to whether the Friend attends meeting or serves on a committee. If the Friend lives away from the area (and in Moorestown about 150 of our over 400 members do live out of state), we look for correspondence that may have been received. We talk to known friends and family to see whether ties are still kept with Moorestown, because we think if distant members return to the area they will come to meeting if they still feel part of our worship community.

Eventually, a letter goes to the inactive member, outlining the concept of membership and the need to be active in the meeting. The financial obligation is mentioned but not emphasized, and for both distant and local members there is a suggestion that perhaps they might want to resign or transfer to another meeting or church. Most of these letters receive no reply, and then the work begins. Personal contact is sought with each of the inactive members, and phone calls and visits are made to local Friends. Distant Friends are approached by letter or telephone. If there is any opening it is pursued with diligence. Occasionally we discover problems that the meeting knew nothing about, such as illness, marital difficulties, or job loss, and we try to minister to the need. However, the break is usually too long-term. Just the fact that no one was aware of the changed circumstances

This newsletter is published quarterly by the Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Trish Walat, clerk, 1515 Cherry St. Philadelphia, PA. 19102. **Please do not duplicate.** To obtain additional copies, contact Helene Pollock or Arlene Kelly, Co-editors, at 215-241-7068.

New Counseling Service Coordinator

Deborah Osborne-Daily, a member of Germantown Meeting and a longtime counselor, has recently taken up the responsibilities of professional coordination of the Friends Counseling Service, which is a program of the Family Relations Committee.

Deborah succeeds Arlene Kelly of Central Philadelphia Meeting, who, during her many years of service in this position, did much to shape the Friends Counseling Service into the vital program it is today.

Lindley Winston continues as psychiatric consultant to the Counseling Service and Steve Gulick continues as the Family Relations Committee's Program Coordinator.

Deborah may be reached through the Family Relations Committee at either 215-241-7068 or 215-988-0140, or directly at 215-248-0489.



PENDLE HILL
A QUAKER CENTER FOR STUDY AND
CONTEMPLATION

Fall Workshops

Gospel Order among Friends

Marty Grundy & Lloyd Lee Wilson October 27-29

Spirituality of the Eastern Church

Jim Forest November 17-19

Praying the Scriptures

An Advent Retreat

Sara Beth Terrell December 8-10

That Our Lives May Express Who We Are

A Journal Exploration

Kendall Dudley December 8-10

For more information about these and other programs
contact Irené Ramsay at 1-800-742-3150
Pendle Hill · 338 Plush Mill Road
Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19086-6099

Coming Events Sponsored by the Family Relations Committee

A Family Retreat: Reflecting on Our Family. Brad Sheeks and 18-year-old daughter Jennie McBee Sheeks will collaborate on this retreat for parents and children, October 6-8 in Cape May, NJ. A great time for the whole family or for one child and one parent to have a special time together.

A Couples Retreat will be held October 13-15, at Cape May, New Jersey, and will be led by Brad Sheeks and Patricia McBee. It is open to all committed couples who wish to deepen their relationships. Our strong, healthy relationships are a treasure, and they deserve to be cared for as we encounter the many pressures in living today.

A Retreat for Men: A Gathering to Explore the Healing of Our Lives. This retreat will be held November 17-19 at Cape May, New Jersey, and will be led by Brad Sheeks. It is designed to be a time for personal healing and growth focused on the passages in a man's life, including relationships with fathers, love relationships, work, and our legacy to the next generation.

For more information about these programs, and for registration fees, contact Brad Sheeks and Patricia McBee as 215-349-6959, or call Family Relations Committee, 215-241-7068. Steve Gulick, Program Coordinator, can provide information about scheduling a workshop or consultation specially designed for your meeting. The mailing address of the Family Relations Committee is Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102-1479.

A special celebration and reception in appreciation of the work of Arlene Kelly as Central Office Counselor with the Friends Counseling Service of the Family Relations Committee will be held on Saturday, November 18, at 3:00 p.m. at Friends Center, 1515 Cherry St. All are welcome.

Differing Views on How to Deal with Inactive Members

(Editors' Note: There is real diversity in the way that Friends across the country deal with the issue of inactive members. Many meetings do not release persons from membership. The age of the meeting (and the number of inactive members who have accumulated), and the Yearly Meeting assessment are among the relevant factors. The following exchange of letters between Frank Kuehner and Sue Heath is intended to stimulate more dialog on this open-ended topic.

Dear Sue:

I read your article on membership with mixed feelings. My resignation from a meeting several years ago was a very painful decision. Even though I was a young adult I did not have the maturity to handle the matter properly. I had come from another religious tradition, and my attitude toward membership was completely different from that of Friends. My resignation was simply because of my inability to contribute financially. That was a very painful time for my wife and myself, and I wish that I could have been given more support. At one point I went to the meeting and gave a contribution as a token and apology. One woman was very judgmental in responding to me. I wonder now how it would have been if she had known the whole story. . . .

I am now a member of another meeting. Now, as was true earlier, I see membership as more a matter of belief than anything else, with a focus on practice rather than dogma. I wish this were more understood. . . . It is important to be very sure that when an individual becomes a member, he or she understands the obligations or responsibilities of membership. There is also the question of the responsibilities of the meeting toward the individual member. Some meetings have pastoral care visits. When I look at the examples you give, I'm concerned that such a length of time went by before the inactive person was contacted. People go through many changes and the ability to give is different at different times. Also, I wonder how much this would be different if there were not the matter of the Yearly Meeting assessment. Perhaps we should have an "inactive" membership category which could go into effect during those periods in which a Friend needs to sort things out or is unable to participate in a more active manner for various reasons.

Frank Kuehner, Arch Street Meeting

Dear Frank:

Thanks for your deeply felt and thoughtful response to my article. I agree with what you say about the importance of taking each person's situation into account. At Moorestown Meeting our procedures were set up to encourage more contact with inactive members to find out why they were inactive. We start with a list of 25 and end up releasing maybe 6 or 8. Contact does take place, circumstances are considered, and compassion is shown! We are very receptive when a member says "I can't contribute money at this time in my life." And, a contribution of \$10 counts! We are aware, however, that when there is trouble the instinctive response is often to withdraw. The person who may need us the most is the one who is unable to respond, and our letters just go into a large pile of other things on the person's conscience, adding to the feeling of being worthless. And we are sorry about that. We do all we can to make a contact and to try to help. But also, in our society many people deal with things by not dealing. They ignore our letters and communications because they don't want to be bothered. Moorestown has decided that we do not want to retain these people indefinitely. They have to give **something**. At the same time, I agree with you that another category of membership would be helpful. This is something Moorestown has been asking Yearly Meeting for during the last five years.

Being a Quaker is a state of mind. It should not require a name on a membership list. Membership lists are for the convenience of the clerical types in the Meeting, and there are people who are called to maintain them and worry about them. All our communications stress that you can still be a Quaker, and when you are ready you can join a meeting again, ours or another one. We do not excommunicate. We just take you off our list. The faith is there and the person is always welcome.

Sue Heath

is an indication that the member had been growing away from the meeting over a long period of time, and it is hard to come in at such a late date to offer understanding and support. That is not to say that Overseers do not try, only that this situation is difficult, and it makes Overseers freshly aware of the need to keep in contact, to notice when someone has fallen away and to follow up before too much time passes.

Over weeks and months, replies to the letters are sought. Some examples were printed at the beginning of this article. Finally, for all the ones who cannot be contacted, or for whom the contact was inconclusive, a final letter is sent. While it is not an ultimatum, it tries very hard to be clear that the inactive member must make a decision! "This is the final letter in our series of efforts to contact you regarding the future of your membership," it begins. It briefly restates the need for participation in meeting membership, both with personal contact, attendance at Meeting for Worship and other events, and financial support.

Then it says, "We ask that you consider the following alternatives and let us know of your intentions for continuing your membership." The alternatives are as follows:

- I value my membership, and I am enclosing a contribution.
- I have been attending _____ Meeting (or Church) and would like to transfer my membership.
- I have been out of touch with Friends for a number of years and find I am unable to meet my membership responsibilities. I request that my name (and those of my minor children) be removed from membership.
- Although I resign my membership, I would like to stay in touch and have enclosed \$20 to continue receiving the meeting newsletter for a year.

There is a space for a signature and the date, and a space for comments. Then the letter concludes:

"If we do not hear from you by _____ [date about six weeks away], you will be formally released from membership in Moorestown Meeting. We regret the finality of this communication, but you will always be welcome to reapply for membership, either here or in another meeting, whenever you feel ready to commit yourself to the responsibility of full membership."

The series of letters ending with the modified questionnaire quoted above has been very productive, with about half the members contacted returning the form as asked. For the ones who do not return it, one more attempt is made to contact them by phone or visit, and if there is still no change in their feelings, the Meeting for Business is asked to release them. For a release, the name is printed in Monthly Meeting minutes, which go to every member every month, and the clerk sends a letter informing the member that he or she has been released. That letter tries to be warm and loving, and to leave the door open for a future return to membership in the Religious Society of Friends.

Efforts to Encourage Participation

Increasing the activity of members is the goal of the Membership Committee. During the process described above, Friends are always alert to ways to bring an absent or inactive member into fuller participation. Each year, the Nominating Committee obtains a list of nearby members who do not serve on committees. These Friends are asked to join a committee. The meeting encourages members to offer rides to Friends who do not attend Meeting for Worship, or to invite an inactive Friend to one of the breakfasts, Family Nights, Potluck Suppers and Discussion Evenings, or other events planned by Overseers to bring Friends together.

Distant members are more of a challenge. We try to contact our out of town members each year by mail, often utilizing a form letter with a personal note at the bottom. Overseers also send a note or card at Christmas, asking for news of the member

and his or her family. The monthly newsletter is mailed to all members and attenders, and is the main instrument of contact for distant members. In the newsletter we appeal for news. One somewhat effective tactic has been to ask Friends who do a Christmas letter to send a copy to the meeting, and about ten are received each year. News from them is printed in the newsletter, and the letters themselves are posted in the meeting house for others to read.

Overseers try to discourage full membership for children of members born out of state. We feel that these families should become involved where they live, and they are gently urged to do so. Nonetheless, we carry ten or fifteen children, full and associate members, on the rolls whom we do not know. Children at a distance who are full members are a special problem, since they often have not learned anything about the meeting and have no idea what membership means. Usually at age 21 they begin to receive all the mailings that go to members, including requests for contributions, and within three years some begin to appear on the Three Year List of non-contributors. The process of contacting them, at an age when Americans are often on the move and changing addresses yearly or more often, explaining the obligations of membership, trying to activate them and help them move forward, is complicated by the fact that they have never been part of the meeting in a meaningful way.

Work with New Members

In recent years, as we have become more aware of the need to involve members and keep them active, Overseers and Clearness Committees have tried to include more about membership responsibilities in the process when new members apply for membership. We try to explain how committees work and the need for everyone to do something. The meeting budget is explained, including our obligations to Yearly and Quarterly Meetings, and there is a figure that Finance Committee uses liberally, the so-called "fair share" or amount each member, adult and child, husband and wife, would need to pay to cover the

budget. Often new members do not know how much is expected as a contribution, and this "fair share" is a place to begin.

In Moorestown, the person appointed to welcome a new member has a long term responsibility to that member as a "big brother/sister." Since the welcomer will be an ongoing mentor to the new member., Overseers try to match welcomer and member by mutual interests and to do all they can to foster the long term relationship.

Membership for Friends is a commitment to a group as well as a statement of religious faith. The community's strength and vitality is only as great as the sum of what each of the individual members brings. Just as the quality of Meeting for Worship is dependent on what is brought by the seeker, so also in the secular life of the meeting the time and effort of each member is essential. Overseers, Ministry and Counsel, or an equivalent committee has the calling to foster the individual commitment, helping each Friend to give to the meeting in times of plenty and also to ask from the meeting in times of need.

Sue Heath, a member of Moorestown Meeting, serves as the (paid) Meeting Coordinator, with responsibility for the office, records, publications, public relations, calendar, committee liaison, and support to the volunteers of the meeting.

Questions for Reflection

1. Are we, as Overseers, clear about the difference between members who are prevented by personal problems or hardship from participating in the life of the meeting, and members for whom apathy or disinterest is the main obstacle?
2. How can we become more alert to signs of need, more familiar with members' friends and support networks, and more willing to inquire when someone is missed?
3. Have we, as Overseers and as a meeting, given conscious reflection to the question of membership and what we understand to be the responsibilities of the member to the meeting and the meeting to its members?