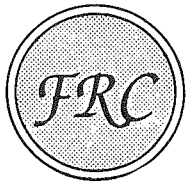


# PASTORAL CARE NEWSLETTER



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

Vol. V, No. 3

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## Discerning Our Leadings as Overseers

By Martha Bush

*How do I strive to maintain the integrity of my inner and outer lives -- in my spiritual journey, my work and my family responsibilities? How do I manage my commitments so that overcommitment, worry and stress do not diminish my integrity?*

Query on Integrity  
Faith and Practice,  
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 1997

Overseers are responsible for the pastoral care of a religious society that does not rely on a paid minister to meet goals, address needs, reconcile differences. This is an extraordinary calling, especially in today's stressed and overly busy culture.

I have come to believe that the quality and nature of our compassion--our expression of God's love--is deeply affected by how we view ourselves and by how we fairly balance competing needs. We are continuously called to strike a balance between consideration of ourselves and of others in our community or among constituents within the meeting. Our ability to strike these balances more fairly will be enhanced by our increased attention to taking time to listen for the leadings of the Spirit, to caring for ourselves and to setting limits with ourselves and with others.

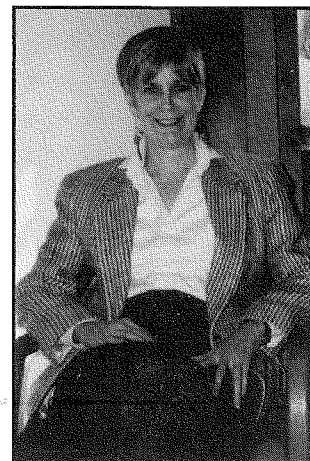
### Meeting Our Own Needs

I start with a personal examination because I am convinced that the balance we reach in our individual lives will affect the personal energy

available to us for giving pastoral care in our meetings. We are obligated to care for ourselves so that we may be better able to respond to Divine Guidance as we serve others.

The following questions may help us assess how we are balancing the two sometimes competing considerations: "What do I owe others?" and "What do I owe myself?"

- Do I find that I have enough time and energy for what is most important in my life?
- Do I frequently feel overwhelmed by the demands of my life?
- Do I take time to do things that give me pleasure?



Martha Bush

- Do my loved ones and I have time to eat together, sit together, and talk with each other?
- Do I show loving kindness toward strangers and others I encounter in daily life?
- Do I find that, more often than I like, I am exhausted emotionally and physically?
- Do I notice that I feel anger, resentment, pride, and attachment to my own ideas more than I would like?
- Do I feel that my choices are Spirit led?

If you feel a sense of being out of balance in these areas, you may want to consider whether you are trying to do too much, whether you are attempting to answer the call of others more broadly than is realistic for you. It may be helpful to prayerfully set priorities and limit your commitments to what you can reasonably do, based on the highest priorities.

### Why This is Fair

I raise these issues because of my own history. In my 20's, 30's and even 40's, I felt no sense of my own limits nor was I very aware of the forces that were working on me, that led me to action, and that influenced my interactions. I also did not know that I had not only a right but a duty not to help in some situations.

Without conscious consideration of my values and priorities, I took on more obligations than was fair to those I served, particularly, my son. I rarely experienced refusal, renewal, or restoration. Perhaps I felt too heavily the burden of the world's injustices. As I reflect on it, my behavior looked like I believed I was omnipotent and could do it all.

It can help us as Overseers to acknowledge that we are to let the Spirit flow through us, discerning from moment to moment our call to action or rest, to giving or receiving, to restoration or production, to saying "no" or

saying "yes," to silence or speaking. The paradoxical result may be that if we can surrender our need to act and can function more under the Light of the Divine, we may be better able to serve.

### Tools for Change

Many tools may help us keep in touch with the Divine call. For me, meditation, prayer, time with friends, walking, inspirational reading, music, and less radio or TV help me live more of my time each day in the Light and equip me to face these difficult ethical questions of what/when to do for others, and what/when not to do.

Each of us can consider what tools are most helpful in keeping us centered and open to the way of the Divine in our daily lives. Valuing self-restoration and limits may require that we embrace new values and a special discipline. These values may conflict with the much earlier but still powerful religious and cultural legacy that most of us carry, i.e., Puritanism and the Enlightenment.

### Mindfulness as Integral to the Divine Flow

On a moment to moment basis, mindfulness of "where am I; who am I right now," and "how can I best be with others or with myself right now" can help us surrender to the Divine flow. This may contrast with our own tendencies toward a more constricted or, alternatively, inflated view of what we must accomplish.

Let's look at the hypothetical situation of an active, giving and busy Overseer who is headed out for a restorative walk. She may have been in a challenging conversation earlier or heard some disappointing news and needs time to reflect and gather herself. Just as she is leaving, the phone rings. Should she answer it? Is her ability to respond to others' needs limited in this moment in time? Would she better serve the Divine if she continued out the door and responded to the caller's phone message later, once she had restored herself? If she answers the phone, might she have too little to give?

Two deeply physiological aspects of life--body care and our emotional life--influence the quality of our compassion. I've come to know that, like cranky little kids, we are influenced in

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## It's Time to Renew Your Subscription to "Pastoral Care Newsletter" for '98-'99

The time rolls around quickly. Enclosed with this issue is subscription information for '98-'99. If you are not already doing so, consider ordering a copy for each Overseer.

We are looking forward to articles on pastoral care of single people in our meetings, care of persons taking stands of conscience, response to alcohol and drug addiction, and help in discerning the meeting's leadings about marriages of persons of the same gender.

### Have YOU sent in your reader survey?

If you haven't sent in your reader survey from the January issue of PCN, please do so right away. It will help us plan upcoming issues. Thanks!

## Planning for Quaker Separation and Divorce Mediation Service

At a time when a marriage is irretrievably broken, there is frequently a great deal of pain and anger. The Quaker Separation and Divorce Mediation Service hopes to provide a climate that both reinforces and nurtures divorcing couples' spiritual values while supporting them in planning for the care of their children, if any, and negotiating the distribution of their assets. The goal of divorce mediation is to develop an agreement which both sides feel will work for them and their children.

This service is being developed jointly by the Family Relations Committee and the Friends Conflict Resolution Programs. The planning committee invites interested persons to join the planning process. They are also seeking members of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting who are divorce mediators. For information, call Brenda Wolfer at (610)358-3052 evenings or (610)566-7710 daytime.

## Upcoming Couple Enrichment Events for PYM

**Sharing the Spiritual Path**, a weekly series for couples, six Tuesday evenings, April 7- May 12, at Friends Center, led by Brad Sheeks and Pat McBee of Central Philadelphia Meeting, \$60 tuition per couple. For information call Brad or Pat at (215)349-6959.

**Couple Enrichment Weekend** at Camp Onas, October 23-25, led by Gretta and Jacob Stone of Doylestown Meeting. Tentative cost is \$150 per couple for tuition, room, and board. For info. call Jacob or Gretta at (215)345-0575.

## Friends Counseling Service

Professionally-trained counselors, who are active Friends and whose spiritual lives are integral to their approach to counseling, provide confidential services to individuals, couples, and families. Service is not denied because of a person's lack of means. A complete list of counselors can be found in the September 1997 issue of PCN. **For referral, contact Deborah Cooper, Counseling Service Consultant, at (215)988-0140.**



## Pendle Hill

### Strengthening Meetings

#### Coming Into Our Own:

**An Exploration of the Retirement Years**

*Allen and Margaret Hope Bacon/May 10-15*

#### Addictions and Dependencies:

**Working the Steps Among Friends**

*Jon Schafer and Pat McGuire/May 22-25*

#### Inquirers' Weekend: Basic Quakerism

*Jonathan Snipes and Regina Haag/July 10-12*

#### High School YouthCamp

*Leaders to be announced/July 12-17*

#### Quaker Faith as a Guide to Family Living:

**Fun and Learning for Parents and Children**

*Harriet Heath and Lynn Sinclair/July 12-17*

For more information on these and other programs contact Bobbi Kelly, ext. 137 at (610) 566-4507 or (800) 742-3150  
Box FR - 338 Plush Mill Road - Wallingford, PA 19086

## The Challenge of Discernment

In preparing this issue of *Pastoral Care Newsletter*, the Publications Committee realized how tricky it is to discern our limits and leave space open for the movement of the Spirit. How do we know we are not just looking for excuses not to meet our obligations as Overseers? "I often think," wrote one reader, "of the advice given on airplanes to the effect of 'If the oxygen mask comes down, put on your own before helping a child or another person.' But how much do you have to provide for yourself before you turn your attention to the other?"

There is a risk that we will see meeting our own needs as our highest priority and then attend to others only with the energy that is left over. Is that what we want to say to Overseers? Aren't we adults who can control our behavior even though we are hungry and tired? Should the guiding question be "What *minimal* needs of mine must be met that I may serve others?"

Another reader responded that a workshop with John Calvi at Pendle Hill had a profoundly helpful impact on her life when Calvi asserted that if you want to nurture others, you have to take care of yourself. "There is such a preponderance among Friends of the give-give-give philosophy, most Overseers need this message of discernment."

"This article really spoke to me, an all-time doer who grew up as a preacher's daughter," commented another reader. "As a Friend and currently an overseer, I want to give more credence to the Divine who fills the space between a need and a solution. I don't want to be a fool rushing in without acknowledging that God is already at work." I appreciated the suggestion that Overseers step back from pressing needs and set up vehicles for mutual caring in the Meeting. There is enough spiritual nourishment for all, enough to receive and to give.

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*Continued from page 4*

more burden on Overseers. Many people made small changes that have slowly built a new vitality in our meeting. Ten years ago, we started an Attenders Committee. Over the years, that group has done more and more: from organizing a directory of attenders and easier parking, to a personal weekly welcome of visitors, including an invitation to a welcome table.

### Conclusion

As leaders in our meetings, we are asked to face our own strengths and limits. From this stance of self-awareness we are able to give most economically and meaningfully to our meetings.

Welcoming the Transcendent into our lives and relationships gives us strength to acknowledge our limitations and to seek clarity in recognizing where/when we are called to respond. The Spirit helps us know when we should say "no" and when we should say "yes." It helps us know when to seek support or relief in meeting responsibilities. Devotion to following Divine guidance can help us to be fair to others when perhaps we would rather blame them, find fault with their suggestions or write them off as not helpful or reliable.

We can assure ourselves with the following:

- We are not alone in this, and this journey is not by our will alone.
- We can be led in discerning the timing for addressing others, to courageously and lovingly speak or refrain from speaking.
- Each of us can discern what is my "stuff" thrown into the situation and what is the reality.

The more we care for ourselves, the more we are able to give due consideration to others. The more we set limits, the more we can give. The more we surrender our desire to take on the burdens of others, the more Light we enable the other to experience. The less committed we are to our own envisioned outcome, the more we are able to make a way for the experience of the Light by ourselves and by others.

The sacrifice we are called to make is not of our own well-being, or of our self, but of our ego, our power, our control, our attachment to our desired outcome or result.

*Martha Bush, a former lawyer, now does counseling with troubled teens and their families. She is a member of Central Philadelphia Meeting*

judgment, actions, and ability to be kindly toward others by plain old hunger, tiredness, or lack of physical activity or fresh air. We will better serve others and allow God's love to flow through us if we recognize our physical needs before they encumber and hinder us.

Similarly, it helps us to acknowledge when we are feeling irritable, frustrated or bored. Awareness of feelings does not mean that we have to express them. Awareness involves knowing, acknowledging, tolerating, and experiencing the feeling consciously, lest it unconsciously affect our behavior in ways we would regret later.

Anger or frustration with others is particularly important to give attention to. These emotions may signal that current problems or conflicts need to be faced. Or the emotions may mean a current stimulus has triggered feelings from previous experiences.

#### **Accepting Limitations in Our Corporate Life**

The dilemma of limited energies also faces us in our meeting life. There are many needs and what seems like too few resources. For Overseers, the burden today is particularly heavy in light of the larger context of our community. Our culture is hectic, competitive, materialistic, violent, and overly stimulating.

Further, the responsible side of ourselves must ask: "As pastoral caregivers in our religious community, when should Overseers say 'no' to a given demand on our attention?" We are responsible for the well-being of individual members and for the life of the community as a whole. If we cut back to focus our energies, what will happen to the meeting?

It may lessen our stress to acknowledge that conflicting needs are inherent in the human condition. We simply cannot meet everyone's needs in all circumstances. By default some needs and goals are not attended to while our attention is captured by other apparently more pressing needs.

Choosing not to respond to an opportunity for caring can be painful and difficult. For example, to see a homeless person on the way to the meetinghouse and do nothing can be draining. Yet, if we stop to be present to that

person, it may cause us to neglect other commitments.

#### **Why Setting Priorities and Limits Supports the Life of the Meeting**

If our meeting is faced with limited resources, we will need to consciously weigh the interests of one aspect of our community against another as well as to decide when we are called

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*The more we set limits ,  
the more we can give.*

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to act and when not to act. Our challenge is to make these decisions overtly, not "choice by default," that is, failing to decide and just trying to do too much. Directly facing these conflicts helps us discover our priorities and gifts as well as God's call for us.

We cannot know fully where any decision may lead. Let's take the example of the Overseer who does opt for the walk and does not answer the phone call immediately. The caller, in some instances, may discover previously unknown inner strengths and/or non-Overseer resources in her/his life. Too much help can create more dependence than is needed or healthy, and, eventually will lead to burn-out of the Overseer doing the caretaking.

Similarly, we all have known new members who don't feel entitled to set limits in their meeting participation and are extremely giving. Often these members either burn out and leave, or fail to meet agreed upon obligations. That individual would better serve by committing only to what is reasonable.

If the meeting has less than enough resources, it will need to examine what it can realistically do. This examination requires a deep searching for the leading of the Spirit as to what can be laid down. The result may be a more vital community that touches more souls.

#### **Checklist for Priority Setting**

The queries below are offered as a beginning point for an assessment of how your meeting is doing with values and priorities.

Do we as Overseers...

- find we don't have the time, energy, and/or resources to address the deeper longings and needs of the meeting community?
- frequently feel overwhelmed by the demanding details of day to day pastoral care?
- have/take/make time to enjoy each other, with fun and joyful sharing?
- have/take/make time to meaningfully share about our own life journeys and the deeper questions we face in attempting to live our lives under the Divine will?
- seek consciously to discern when to give support to someone with a difficult assignment and when to shift an assignment to another Overseer because it is beyond the limits (time, talent, energy) of a given Overseer?
- in our committee life, productively deal with conflict, differences, and high emotions during discussions? Do we address each other directly and plainly yet without rancor, as needed. Do we look at conflict and differences as an opportunity for growth and deeper collaboration?

### Lessening Overseers' Load

Some of the above queries suggest more work and further burnout. Below are two ways to lessen the load on Overseers by the facilitation of increased member self-care within the meeting and by clearer communication about membership expectations.

Members will have greater resources and thus fewer crises if they are connected meaningfully to others in their religious community. We all need human connection which can be easily lost in today's culture. Connection is vital to our mental and physical health and to successful day to day functioning. Overseers can encourage structures that are primarily self-operating and self-supporting. These could be small worship groups; small support groups; groups of special needs such as men's or women's groups, Christ-oriented or universalist Friends, etc.; social events like Friendly Eights, meeting weekends, etc. (For discussions of building a vital meeting life, see PCN Vol. IV, Nos. 3 and 4.)

The work of the Overseers can be better shared if we have more active members.

Overseers can facilitate a periodic process whereby members corporately address each other around questions of what are our obligations toward each other. (For an excellent model of how one meeting has done this see PCN, Vol. I, No. 4.)

### Sustaining Hope and Measuring Results

If we expect too much of ourselves or our meeting we can easily become discouraged. Or we may press for goals that are unrealistic and impractical, thus leading to burnout and disappointment. It may help to recognize that change will come in small steps and primarily from changing ourselves, not others. We will be more empowered and less burnt out as Overseers, if we can accept that corporate change will come not from striving to change others. It will come, however, as each individual gradually changes her/his own behaviors, beliefs, and values under the meeting's loving care.

I have been amazed at how my own inner changes manifest themselves outwardly. My tendency in some conflicts is to approach the other with my negative responses to their suggestion. However, I have found that if I wait until I have processed my feelings and find the goodness in their effort, I am able to be a conduit for the life of the Spirit. I can make constructive suggestions, compassionately acknowledge our differences, and affirm their contribution to the meeting.

It is the small changes that eventually lead us into the larger changes. I have been under the weight of our meeting not doing enough to greet newcomers. This burden was made heavier by the suicide, in the 1980's, of a young woman architect who visited just a few times. She told me she was too shy to come into coffee hour.

Over the last 10 years, little by little, I have seen my meeting become more gracious to newcomers. These changes occurred without

*continued on insert page 2*

### Questions for Reflection

*In this issue questions for reflection can be found in the text on pages 1-2 and 4. --ed.*