

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Overseers, Ministry and Counsel,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings*

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Reaching Out to Singles in Our Meetings

by **Bonalyn Mosteller**

Think about the last three non-work-related conversations you had with people. What did you talk about? Did you mention recent events with your kids, grandchildren, or spouse? Did you refer to recent activities and conversations with such significant others? Think of the last time you met someone you hadn't seen for awhile. Did you immediately ask "what's new" with the person's children or spouse?

What responses do single people have in such situations? There is often an uncomfortable silence while the single person thinks what is "significant" enough to share: "Dare I tell this person I am concerned about my ailing dog? While important to me, my dog pales in comparison to having grandchildren to talk about." These can be stressful, even sad, moments for singles in that they can reinforce how different singles' life circumstances and issues may be.

Of course, some singles have grandchildren and some marrieds don't, so the example is not completely valid. However, the point is to heighten awareness that singles may experience themselves as outside the mainstream of meetings more than we think.

Many single people feel well integrated into the life of their meeting and play active, even leadership, roles. Even those Friends may from time to time feel outside the mainstream. Here we'll explore ideas about how to make meetings more comfortable and accepting for all the single people among us.

WHO ARE THE SINGLES IN YOUR MEETING?

When you hear the word "singles," which faces in your meeting come to mind? You may picture



Bonalyn Mosteller

young, unmarried women and men. The classification of "singles," however, might include never-marrieds of all ages, separated but married people, people recently separated who had been in long-term (but unmarried) relationships, people in same-gender relationships or interested in same-gender relationships who don't feel comfortable having the nature of their sexual orientation made public, middle aged or older single people, and recent or long-term widows/widowers or divorced people. The singles group at the FGC Gathering has defined itself as being for "those who have never married and those who have lost a partner to separation, death, or divorce."

The categories above call attention to middle aged or older singles separately. My experience has been that as single people reach middle/late middle

age (or older), their singleness may become "invisible." The assumption may be that if people have been single a long time, they must want it that way and must, therefore, not want others to think of them in the traditional category of "single." This could be a false assumption, in turn leading such people to feel more isolated as they age.

The same could be true for older widows/widowers—especially widows. I learned through years of hospice work and leading grief and bereavement groups that often shortly after an older spouse's death, people stopped referring to the emotional grieving process (although they continued to help problem-solve issues). With younger widows/widowers, it seemed more customary to discuss the emotional loss and inquire about whether the person was seeing anyone new.

Overseers committees generally reach out quickly to married people who separate. However, when break-ups occur in relationships with less formal commitments, the suffering may be equally great or greater because such relationships may not be taken as seriously by others. Examples might include break-ups in same-gender relationships,

continued on page 4

As a single person...

As a single person who is not in a significant relationship, the meeting is the place that I come to be accepted, to share my love and gifts, and to belong.

I have no family nearby so it takes a lot of effort on my part to have my needs met in what feels like a couples-oriented world. In a world where odd numbers at the dinner table are avoided and couples are awkward about going out together with single people, I can feel left out.

In more than 25 adult years of being Quaker – all of them single and unattached – I've been part of two large urban meetings one on the east coast and one on the west coast and now am in a medium-sized meeting in a smaller city. In every meeting I've been very active in committee work and other volunteer activities for the meeting community, and along the way I've gotten to know just about everyone in the meeting each time. In the larger meetings, I found a number of other single women near my age as well as numerous couples I developed close friendships with. As a middle-aged person finding my place in the social life of a smaller meeting has been more of a challenge. There are no other single women my age and couples near my age are tied up with child rearing. I have, however, received generous pastoral care from this meeting. Shortly after I transferred my membership, I was diagnosed with cancer. The meeting asked what support I wanted and then followed through with escorts to chemotherapy and prepared meals.

Even in the larger meetings, finding my social niche hasn't always gone smoothly. Since I have been active in the meeting some people have had the perception that I'm self-sufficient and happy, and don't need special care. There have been times when I've been clerk of this or that but no one calls me up for a meal or a movie or a walk -- I find I'm treated as a self-sufficient ecosystem. These have been the loneliest times for me. I, and other single people, have a need to be included in the social life of meeting members, to feel valued without being a super-volunteer.

Many singles are not so outgoing as I am. They need to be invited to volunteer, to socialize, and to become part of the community. I encourage Oversight Committees to be considerate of the depth and breadth of single members' support systems within the meeting. I also encourage them to provide evening adult socializing for both couples and singles in addition to asking for their involvement in the life of the meeting through volunteer work.



PENDLE HILL

Strengthening Meetings

Inquirers' Weekend:

Basic Quakerism

Chel Avery and Claudia Wair · July 16–18

High School YouthCamp

July 11–18

Young Adult Friends Gathering

September 4–6

Gathering of Quaker Ministers and Elders

Lloyd Lee Wilson, Marty Grundy,

Linda Chidsey & Brian Drayton

September 9–12



For more information on these and other programs contact
Shirley Dodson, ext. 127 at (610) 566-4507 or (800) 742-3150
Box FR · 338 Plush Mill Road · Wallingford, PA 19086
www.pendlehill.org · shirley@pendlehill.org

Singles Groups: Keys To Success

- Even if your meeting is small, encourage singles to meet together at someone's home, perhaps quarterly. Each person could identify resources she/he has to offer others and then could ask for types of support needed from others.
- Encourage smaller Quaker singles groups to link to other local, church-related singles groups. Getting larger groups together adds exponentially to the level of fellowship.
- Encourage several meetings which are close geographically to join together to form a singles group.
- Establish a regular meeting place at a centrally located meeting. Occasionally, events will be held at other locations, but having one "home" location is important so that people are not deterred from attending because they don't know where the group is meeting this month.
- A monthly newsletter is extremely useful, perhaps essential. This can be as simple as a flier with reminders about upcoming meetings. It is key to advertise group activities two to three months ahead of time to pique interest and to get dates on people's calendars.
- Groups need several leaders, not just one. Steering committees work best. If only one person comes forward to lead, encourage this person to identify others to create a steering committee. Having a strong, upbeat, organized leader and steering committee can be crucial to the group's success.
- Another criterion for success is that the atmosphere of the meetings needs to be one of camaraderie and creation of friendships – not one of finding a date. This tone is best set by the attitudes and personal behaviors of the steering committee members as well as by the types of monthly programs. As a way to generate this atmosphere, make sure that the steering committee members are equally welcoming of both genders and all types/ages/races of single people.
- Time needs to be spent on introductions at each meeting. This can be accomplished using different questions each month to generate energy and provide new ways to get acquainted. Examples are asking people to introduce themselves by sharing something they are concerned about in the world or something they view as positive happening in the world or in their lives. A variation is to ask people first to answer the "introduction" questions in pairs or quartets and then to share a partner's response with the larger group.
- Singles meetings need to have a variety of programs/activities. Some successful examples are singing accompanied by guitar or piano, picnics, sports (volleyball is especially popular), speakers, square dancing and occasional weekend two-day outings. Speakers are useful, if their topics relate to singles. Some successful topics have been parenting, dating, and advantages of being single. An example of a creative activity is asking everyone to bring something that reflects a keen interest or hobby. Give each person a few minutes to share his/her "passion".
- Regular meetings need to be interactive. Having a speaker who answers questions from one person at a time doesn't meet this criterion very well. Meetings are more successful when group exercises are employed which ensure that everyone gets to talk. For example, after a speaker, small groups can first share thoughts on a couple of predetermined questions and then share thoughts in the larger group. In this way, everyone has a voice. Another variation would be having discussion topics where people share their personal examples/challenges related to a speaker's points.
- When planning meetings, it is helpful if steering committee members think about creative ways to get more people involved. The principle here is that involvement builds commitment and enhanced valuing of the group. An example of a low-risk way to get people more involved is to recruit new people to be greeters at each meeting.
- Time also needs to be devoted to "advertising" upcoming events. Often, future attendance depends upon the enthusiasm of the person explaining the events. Recruit good "salespeople" for this role.
- Always remember to acknowledge any and all people who have made contributions to the group. As people feel appreciated, they usually become even more committed.

relationships without traditional marriage contracts, or break-ups of very young couples.

Another special challenge may be for meetings to support both people during separations and divorces. [See *PCN*, Vol. II, No. 2] It may seem natural to give more support to the more verbal, extroverted person or to one who has been left or reports abuse within the relationship. It requires intentional effort to offer equal support to both parties. And, of course, divorces can cause as much emotional pain as deaths, or even more.

In addition to thinking about non-traditional categories of singles, Overseers also might consider the numbers of active versus inactive singles. Obviously, inactive members/attenders are not having their needs met by the meeting. Even active singles who are well integrated into the life of the meeting may have needs that are not being met. How would you know? Some ideas are included below.

LEARNING ABOUT THE SINGLES IN YOUR MEETING

Overseers might want to begin by stepping back to get a big picture overview of the singles in their meeting. How many single people are there? And what proportion of the total meeting do they represent? Overseers might be surprised to identify how high this proportion is. But even if there is only one single person in the meeting, that person warrants the meeting's pastoral consideration.

Would singles in your meeting agree that a substantial number of meeting activities seem to be inclusive of them? A first step for Overseers could be to consider unintended ways in which singles might feel excluded from activities. For example, the idea of Quaker 8's suggests four couples. What about 7's? When planning meetings and events, do you consider the special challenges of childcare for single parents? Could you rename "family night" to make the event more inclusive of singles (and marrieds without children as well)? Are events held during work hours when most younger singles are not able to attend? If Overseers can become more aware of unintended ways in which singles might feel in a minority out-group, they can begin to find creative ways to make activities more singles-friendly.

One strategy for Overseers is to call a meeting of singles and ask them in what ways their needs *are* and *are not* being met by the meeting. Ideally, singles who don't regularly attend the meeting would also be

Additional Resources on Singles

Advances in Singlehood: A Map for Singles, by Susie Shellenberger and Michael Ross, Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.

Baker's Handbook of Single Adult Ministry, by Douglas L. Fagerstrom, 1997.

Be An Outrageous Older Woman, Ruth Harriet Jacobs, Harper Perennial, Division of Harper Collins, 1997.

51 Good Things to Do while You're Waiting for the Right One to Come Along: A Guide for Being Single, Harold Ivan Smith, 1994.

Keeping the Love You Find: A Guide for Singles, Harville Hendrix, 1993.

Living With Oneself And Others: Working Papers On Aspects Of Family Life, by New England Yearly Meeting, 1993. (Has a good small section on being single.)*

Never To Be A Mother: A Guide For All Women Who Didn't-Or Couldn't-Have Children by Linda Hunt Anton. Harper, 1992.*

Positively Single: How To Be Singularly Happy by Vera Peiffer. Element, 1991.*

* Books marked with * are available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, see "Of Interest" on page 5.

phoned. In this way, a larger proportion of singles' experiences will be represented in Overseers' considerations.

Another strategy is to ask a single member or attender to be responsible for investigating singles resources in the community, particularly local church-related and/or spiritual singles' events and meetings. This person can then share the information quarterly in the monthly meeting newsletter

Consider ways to ensure that Oversight reflects on singles' needs and issues. Do you have at least one single person on Oversight? Ask this person to be a "point person/pulse taker" for singles. This person would be charged with identifying singles' issues and communicating them to the full committee. Of course it is not valid to assume that one person could adequately represent all singles' perspectives, but it is helpful to have someone charged with keeping singles' concerns in mind.

Each Quaker meeting could devote a major portion of one annual Oversight meeting to reflection on singles' issues. Ask several singles to attend and have an open discussion. From time to time, reflect on whether singles' needs and interests

Of Interest to Overseers...

CAN YOU HELP WITH PCN?

The committee that supports the editor of *Pastoral Care Newsletter* needs additional members to help screen manuscripts, identify topics and writers, and promote PCN. We meet by telephone and e-mail, so geography need not be a bar to service. We would welcome readers of PCN who are not members of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Please consider whether you might be called to this service. It is not a lot of work, but would help maintain the vitality of this publication. For information and to offer your help, contact Sue Heath, clerk of the committee, at (609)234-4159 or susandheat@aol.com.

BOOKS FOR PASTORAL CARE

The Henry J. Cadbury Library of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting provides resources to meetings throughout North America. Overseers can request books recommended in the resource section of each issue of PCN or order a collection of books related to a concern in your meeting. How about establishing a corner in your meeting's library for books on pastoral care issues?

Much of the library service to distant borrowers is done by mail. Books are mailed library rate with mailing instructions and return label enclosed. Borrowers are expected to pay postage both ways. There is no charge other than postage for meetings in Philadelphia Yearly and their members. Individuals outside Philadelphia Yearly Meeting may join the library for an annual fee of \$30.

For information contact the PYM library at (215)241-7220 or by e-mail at library@pym.org.

INQUIRERS' WEEKEND: BASIC QUAKERISM at Pendle Hill, July 16-18

Pendle Hill inquirers' weekends are a resource to meetings in helping attenders and new members ground themselves in Quakerism. Co-led by Claudia Wair of Langley Hill (VA) Meeting and Chel Avery of Goshen (PA) Meeting. For information contact Pendle Hill (610)566-4507 ext.142, registrar@pendlehill.org, www.pendlehill.org.

FGC GATHERING, July 3-10, Kalamazoo, MI

Friends General Conference Gathering is an opportunity to give members a sense of a wider family of Friends and thus to strengthen the meeting. Many meetings provide partial scholarships to members attending the Gathering. FGC offers matching grants for persons attending for the first time. Contact FGC at (215)561-1700, gathering@fgc.quaker.org, or <http://www.quaker.org/fgs/gathering99>.

FRIENDS COUNSELING SERVICE

Friends Counseling Service not only provides counseling to individuals, couples, and families, but also provides consultations and workshops for meetings on issues pertaining to care of members.

A complete list of counselors appeared in the March 1999 issue of PCN. For information or a referral, contact Deborah Cooper, Counseling Service Consultant, at (215)248-0489.

RENEW NOW FOR NEXT YEAR'S *Pastoral Care Newsletter*

might have changed over time. If so, are different approaches needed?

If your meeting has an Outreach Committee, it could be asked to come up with a plan for *internal* outreach, which would include a segment devoted to outreach to singles.

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

The best way to welcome single people is to make sure that your meeting has activities that are welcoming regardless of a person's family status – worship sharing and study groups, hymn sings, pot-luck meals, etc.

In scheduling committee meetings and other meeting events consider the needs of single working people and single parents. Are there singles who need help with transportation for evening meetings?

For singles who don't have grown children or families, it would be especially appreciated to be considered at holidays, which can be especially rough. Singles would really appreciate invitations for holiday meals. Something as simple as a sign-up sheet could be arranged for folks wanting to share the holidays with others.

Singles may need focused support at a time of a health or other personal crisis: transportation to medical appointments, someone to bring in prepared food, and/or someone to talk with.

One of the most obvious supports, if there are enough singles in the meeting, is to form a singles group. Even if singles don't come forward asking for support to start such groups, meetings can proactively help singles explore the need. A singles group, then, can serve as a natural, organic approach

to outreach to single people in the community, without the “proselytizing” connotations that make Friends uncomfortable. If singles do begin a regular group, Overseers can support them by offering meeting space and perhaps even some funding for special events. It is important, though, that singles be responsible for their group including generating funding themselves. More detail about creating singles groups is presented in the sidebar on page 3.

There has been a Philadelphia Singles organization in existence for well over ten years. At times the membership has reached more than one hundred, with 40-50 people attending monthly meetings at the peak of the organization’s activity. The organization is open to all single meeting members/attenders of area meetings and to others regardless of religious affiliation or belief. Radnor Monthly Meeting has served as the home meeting for this organization for at least eight years. Radnor has generously provided space and covered utility costs during this period. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has also contributed funds to the group.

Participants have felt blessed by the atmosphere of camaraderie that they experienced. The group leaders intentionally try to establish an atmosphere of “people caring about people” rather than the more common dating orientation often associated with singles groups. Occasionally, I would hear people say that they were looking forward to attending in order to reconnect with people for whom they had generated genuine regard. I warmly remember a few meetings where I experienced the aliveness or spirit that I associate with a “gathered meeting.” This seemed to occur when we shared at some new, deeper level: when we sang “Amazing Grace” under the stars after a picnic or when we shared personal hobbies/passions that most touched our hearts.

As a byproduct of hosting the singles, Radnor Meeting has been strengthened. People who may never have been inside a meetinghouse came to know where Radnor Meeting was located. A fair number have become very active attenders of the meeting, serving in leadership and committee member capacities.

Not all the ideas suggested in this article will be appropriate for your meeting. My prayer would be that Overseers will make some time to ponder the issues raised here. And, even more important, I hope that each meeting will find at least one new way to minister to single people in your meeting. The ultimate goal for meetings is to be places where *all* members, including those who are single, experience the depth of caring required to trust that they can voice their needs and expect that responsiveness will result.

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Bonahyn A. Mosteller is member of Radnor Meeting and has served on several committees, including serving as clerk of Nominating and a member of Oversight. She has her own organizational and leadership development consulting company which specializes in culture change, leadership development and assisting companies to enliven people’s spirit in the workplace. Bonahyn holds Master and Doctoral degrees in education and psychology.

Questions for Reflection

1. Who are the singles in our meeting? At what life stages are they? Who among them are active in the life of the meeting and who are not?
2. What could we do to learn from the single people in our meeting whether they have needs and desires of the meeting that are not being fulfilled?
3. Are our meeting activities “singles friendly” or do we set up barriers that make single people feel outside the normative group?
4. How could we support singles and others in the meeting in sharing holiday meals?
5. What resources do we have to be responsive to the needs of single persons for practical and emotional support when there is a health crisis?
6. How could we support the development of a singles group within our meeting or our quarter?
7. Who on our committee can take responsibility for giving attention to identifying singles issues and bringing them to the attention of the full committee from time to time?

Pastoral Care Newsletter is published quarterly by the Family Relations Concerns Group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Harriet Heath, clerk. Patricia McBee, editor. We are located at 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102. Comments are welcome. **Please do not duplicate without permission.** To obtain additional copies or to subscribe, contact Steve Gulick, at 215-241-7068 or steveg@pym.org.