

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

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

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Supporting Families in Times of Trouble

by Judith Owens

During the Depression, when my mother was in high school, my grandfather was the sheriff in their rural county in the state of Washington. Since she knew nothing about problems like domestic violence, child-snatching, addictions or infidelity, my mother felt unprepared for the life she found when she moved to the city and began raising a family in the late 30's. But when she talked to her dad about her dismay, he just laughed. "Families all around us had these problems! We just didn't talk about it." Mom often reminded me of this interchange when I spoke with her about how different life seemed when I had children.

Whether the culture really has changed or we're just talking more about family issues, many meetings feel unprepared for the number and severity of problems faced by families under their care. And no wonder! In the past months, I have known of Quaker families struggling with divorce, infidelity, domestic violence, addictions, sexual and physical abuse, acting out children, custody problems, financial difficulties, chronic illness, grief and more. Friends are called on to be helpful in increasingly complex situations that meetings did not openly discuss in the past.

Even the word "family" reflects a wider reality than we may have grown up with. We find in our meetings single parents, remarried families, mixed race families, gay and lesbian couples and families, and various living-together arrangements.

Individuals and oversight committees often feel overwhelmed and under-prepared for the issues that arise. Yet Friends have many empowering tools available for supporting one another through the challenges that our lives present.

The Power of the Meeting Community

When we are at our best, Quakers are capable of reaching out with love and insight to each other. In our worship, we wait in silence, listening intently for the Spirit's message. We trust that there is a Power listening when we pray. Offering a gift of listening to each other can be an expression of love that connects us spiritually and satisfies us deeply.

When we remember our belief in the Inner Light we can relax more and think better. We can trust the family's internal healing capacity and take a respectful stance toward each person. As caregivers we don't have to "fix" people, but we can provide loving support as they find their way to healing.

Among the most critical of our structures is a caring community. Whenever a concern arises we are better able to respond when we have shared deeply in the past and have developed bonds of love and trust with one another. A member of a small urban meeting spoke during worship recently of



Judith Owens

her cancer diagnosis. In the fellowship that followed, people asked her about her treatment, her needs, her hope, and how the meeting could be helpful. I was moved by the loving concern expressed, and thought of the more polite, distant response she might have received. We may become distant when we fear that a personal question could elicit some embarrassing emotion, or a request for our time or effort that we don't feel able to give. We may be guarding our own fear or grief. Or we may momentarily be forgetting the powerful gift of listening. As we pay attention to our connectedness

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this distance can disappear, and we can be lovingly present.

When a Family Problem Comes to Your Committee

Concerns may come to our pastoral care committees in a variety of ways. It is easiest for the committee to respond when a family member contacts someone on the committee and asks for support. On those occasions we don't have to worry about being intrusive. However, we often learn of a concern when a committee member observes something troubling or when another meeting member calls the committee's attention to a situation. In those cases the committee must discern what might be the most appropriate response. Though there may be a concern for the family's privacy, it

One Meeting's Experience:

Meetings Supporting Families Through Tough Times

Instead of our usual story of One Meeting's Experience, in this issue we bring you vignettes of several meetings using creativity and caring in responding to the needs of families.

In one small meeting the live-in boyfriend of a single mother with young children left the family and moved out of state. It wasn't a divorce exactly, since they hadn't been married. On the other hand, the emotional and financial consequences for the mother and her children was just as disorienting. The meeting rallied round in support of the family members who remained in the meeting.

A child developed a fear of death that preoccupied her and kept her awake at night. Her parents, unable to reassure her, asked her if she would like to have a clearness committee in the meeting. There was a session in which Friends shared their feelings about death and their techniques for falling asleep when they were preoccupied. Thereafter, the child slept better and there was a sweet sense of closeness between her and the adults who had met with her.

Several meetings have faced the break-up of a same-gender couple who had been regarded in the meeting as the same as married. The range of responses was colored by the gifts and limitations of the meetings and the individuals involved. In one case,

there was a meeting for divorce in which the couple and the meeting members had an opportunity to grieve the loss of what had been. In another case the partner who left expressed irritation with those who felt that the meeting should have had a role, "We weren't married after all." Nonetheless, the other partner was grieving, and the meeting was perplexed about how to give support to both.

One meeting made very conscious and careful efforts to be loving and supportive to both partners in a marital break-up. Yet each of the partners shared the feeling that the meeting had been more supportive of the other. Members of the meeting continue to stand in steadfast support of both as they find their way, and both partners are still active in the meeting.

In many meetings families with young children have faced the serious illness of one of the parents. One meeting collaborated with another church in bringing in meals for the family on alternating weeks. Members of another meeting did ten loads of laundry each week to support the healthy spouse who was caring for her seriously ill husband. Other families in a meeting invited the children for overnights with their children so that they could have a time away from the stressful situation. Meetings held prayer circles that helped both the family and the meeting members stay open to the Spirit during a time of illness.

must not prevent us from reaching out with a friendly inquiry. The family may be hurt that no one in the meeting noticed that they were struggling or offered support.

Often a pastoral care committee sends a member who feels at ease with the family to express loving concern and ask how the meeting could be helpful. We may offer a clearness committee to help a family through a difficult decision-making process. Perhaps a small group could meet in the family's home for worship. Regular phone calls could be set up so the family members are reminded that we care and will listen. Maybe meals and rides are needed.

Although I often hear caregivers lament that such gestures and offers feel so insubstantial in the face of tragedy, I regularly hear families express immense gratitude for the sense of community these thoughtful offers can engender. Caregivers may need to recall times when we were "on the receiving end" to know how powerful a message of love can be.

Finding Support Beyond the Meeting

It can be tricky to discern what situations can be dealt with by the care and good listening and spiritual support that we can offer, and what situations are beyond our limits. One measure is our own sense of exhaustion and frustration. By sharing in our pastoral care committees when we feel depleted by a family's needs, it may help develop a fuller awareness of the limits to the committee's skills and energies. By keeping ourselves aware of outside supports that may be available we can feel freer to recognize our limitations.

Quarter Care Committees: In very complicated family situations, monthly meetings can be supported in significant ways by their larger communities. Where meetings are near enough to each other to provide practical help, Friends have formed "Quarter Care Committees." In areas where there are no other meetings nearby, other religious congregations in a community might work together in similar ways. More people can mean more hands, so active help like meals and rides can be provided for a longer time. More people can also mean more brains, so difficult decisions like when to involve the police or how to choose nursing care can receive more attention.

More attention to the spiritual needs of a family and the caregivers can significantly support those efforts. The Quarter Care Committee may provide regular worship in a family's home, or a meeting for

healing. Even when meetings are widely scattered, more people can hold the suffering family and friends in the Light.

Referring for Professional Help: When a family needs professional support, there is still a role for the meeting. Sometimes the meeting may provide transportation, childcare or funding to actively assist the family to attend therapy. And at times the referral to therapy comes with the help of the pastoral care committee.

In the September, 1997, Pastoral Care Newsletter, "Helping Friends Seek Professional Help," Barbara Snipes discusses at length the issue of making a variety of professional referrals.

And in the March 1999 issue on alcoholism, Alex Scott gives good, down-to-earth advice that can be helpful in many kinds of difficult situations.

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Members of your committee may want to create a listing of professional resources that are available in the community. In some meetings, there may be Friends who have professional expertise as well as a personal understanding of the family's spiritual needs. Yearly meetings may provide lists of resources or other information.

Some meetings make a book of various resources available to the membership. Such a book serves the double purpose of sharing information and encouraging Friends to seek support for problems they may be experiencing. In addition to counselors, the listing may include lawyers, divorce mediators, addictions specialists, doctors, holistic health providers, low-cost housing and welfare rights advocates.

Risks in the Meeting's Caring

We would like our meetings' support of our members to be loving and seamless. Yet we know that our meetings and our pastoral care committees are filled with human beings with fears and flaws and vulnerabilities. By being attentive to our limitations we may be able to sidestep some of the pitfalls and to be forgiving of one another when our efforts fall short of our ideals.

Confidentiality: A true dilemma arises when we consider confidentiality. Many years ago when my family was relatively new to our meeting, I was

about to undergo some major surgery. Since our children were young and our parents were ill, I spoke to a meeting elder about some concrete assistance for us. When I got home from the hospital, I was quite surprised when Friends I hardly knew arrived with casseroles and sent cards. "What happened?" I asked a friend. "Did someone get up after worship and announce I was having a hysterectomy?" I thought I was joking, but my friend said, "Why, yes!"

It took me a while to understand the balance of community and privacy. I try to remember my initial discomfort upon hearing of that announcement, and weigh those opposing needs. We wish to strive for sensitivity to those we are meaning to help. It is best to ask people whether we can share their needs widely in hopes of a wider response or if they would prefer a smaller circle be aware of their situation.

Knowing Where To Turn With A Concern:

When a meeting has shown the ability to be sensitive with one family's dilemma, another family will notice the greater safety created in the community and be more ready to ask for help. But how does a person know with whom to speak? Since many meetings have evolving membership, taking care to avoid an "insider" and "outsider" level of information is critical. Members of pastoral care committees can regularly inform Friends about their role and availability. Some meetings post the name of an individual who can be contacted, usually the clerk of the pastoral care committee or the clerk of the meeting. If a problem is potentially shameful, it can be even more difficult for a member to trust a group, and it may help to know that an individual can be approached. In some situations, the discernment available in a group is of enough value to overcome the concern about privacy.

Choosing Sides: Avoiding the common pitfall of choosing sides is of particular concern in dealing with family problems. Despite our well-honored belief that "there is that of God in everyone," we seem to need a "wrong-doer" when a couple breaks up or charges of abuse surface. But when we choose sides, or seem to, the possibility of being helpful dissipates rapidly. The safety is lost that people in turmoil need in order to ask for our assistance. And since ours is a faith community, we have a special role in continuing our love and support in the face of human error.

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Quakers and Pastoral Care: A Ministry of Presence

Judy Guerry

February 17-22

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Why, when it's clearly not helpful, do we feel the pull to pick a side? Getting up close to people in pain is a difficult task in itself. We want to understand just how such a thing could happen, sometimes fearing that our own family could be struck by a similar event. If we or those we love have been divorced, involved in infidelity, remarried, sought custody of children or suffered in an abusive relationship, we probably have unhealed feelings and needs. The process of seeking clarity, of asking others for their help in discerning our involvement, of listening instead of "helping," may help us and our community.

Expectations About Change: Many meetings have found that the more broadly they define "family," the more deeply people connect. By discovering commonalities of experience, we transcend differences and open possibilities of mutual caring. Yet, we can do an injustice by expecting everyone in our community to be able to "transcend differences" at the same pace.

Supporting inclusive attitudes may border on a paradoxical rigidity, where only the current version of the "politically correct" outlook is acceptable. In these situations, those who have less comfort or

experience with diversity may be the ones feeling out of place and needing a welcome and patience. Most of us have work to do to be more loving, either in the direction of accepting more diverse members and families, or accepting those who are struggling with inclusivity.

The Meeting's Wounds: When a family within the meeting has sustained a tragedy, our immediate attention and focus is understandably on the family members themselves. But the fabric of the meeting also has been torn. The community can find ways of moving toward healing itself as well. Sometimes when the tragedy involves a death, the memorial service is a transforming and moving experience for the meeting. But when problems involve no comforting ritual, such as a disability, divorce, loss of a job, custody battle, or domestic violence, the meeting needs to be creative and sensitive. In our zeal to avoid gossip, we may also avoid opportunities to speak of our own painful feelings. Meetings for healing and other less formal occasions for discussion can be times to recognize our grief and deepen our connections to each other.

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Summary

I believe Quakers are in a strong position to be the caring communities we all need when life becomes difficult. Our values of community, listening, respect, and inclusion, as well as traditional structures like pastoral care committees are powerful tools we can use confidently and intentionally when families need help.

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Judith Owens, a member of Haddonfield (NJ) Meeting, has worked with meetings and members for 15 years as a counselor with Friends Counseling Service. She is currently a facilitator with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's new project, Deepening and Strengthening our Meetings as Faith Communities. Judith is a marriage and family therapist and directs the New Jersey office of the Penn Council for Relationships. She is married and has three children, age 16 to 28.

Resources on Care of Families

Grounding in Friends Care

- "Alcoholism in the Meeting" by Alex Scott. *PCN*, March 1999.
- "Helping Friends Seek Professional Help" by Barbara T. Snipes, *PCN*, September 1997.
- "Meeting Support of Marriage and Couple Relationships" by Patricia McBee, *PCN*, December 1993.
- "Nurturing the Meeting Community," by Arlene Kelly, *PCN*, March 1997.
- "Separation and Divorce: The Meeting's Role," by Arlene Kelly in *Friends Journal*, February 1991.
- Listening Spirituality, Volume II: Corporate Spiritual Practice among Friends* by Patricia Loring. Washington Grove, Maryland: Openings Press, 1999. Especially chapters 2 and 7. *#
- Living With Oneself and Others: Working Papers on Aspects of Family Life*, by New England Yearly Meeting. NEYM, 76 pp., paperback. *#
- Love Makes a Family: Lesbian and Gay Families in the Religious Society of Friends*, a video by Bonnie Tinker. Sumneytown, PA: Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, 1992. #
- When the Wind Changes: Young Peoples' Experiences of Divorce and Changing Family Patterns* by young Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting. *Quaker Life*, 2001. *

Additional Resources:

- After the Affair* by J. Spring: New York: Harper, 1996.
- In the Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families* by Mary Pipher. New York: Ballentine Books, 1996. #
- Let Them Go Free: a family prayer service to assist in the withdrawal of life support* by Thomas A. Shannon. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1987. #
- Miracles of Courage: How Families Meet the Challenge of a Child's Critical Illness*, by Monica Dickens. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985.#
- Parenting by Heart*, by Ron Taffel and Melinda Blau. Addison Wesley, 1993.
- Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology* by S. Pollack and J. Vaughn. Ithaca, NY, Firebrand, 1987.#
- Stress and the Family: How healthy families Control the Ten Most Common Stresses* by Dolores Curran. Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985. #

For Children

The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library has an extensive list of books for children and young adults on topics such as adoption, divorce, illness, death, stepsiblings, and being the child of a nontraditional family. Ask for the booklist on "Family Challenges."

*Available from the FGC Bookstore, 800-966-4556.

#Available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 215-241-7220. Friends outside PYM can subscribe to the library.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do families access help in our meeting?
2. Is there a sense of being known, of safety, in the meeting? How do we encourage a loving exchange of information so that support can be offered?
3. Do we create the time and space to get to know each other, or are we focused on "getting the job done?" Is it time for us to consider a retreat, more social time, some intergenerational fun?
4. How can we support listening to each other as a Spirit-led activity?
5. Are those who offer pastoral care to our meeting supported by each other and the meeting?
6. When families ask for support and help, do we know where to get information about community resources?
7. Could we organize a Quarter Care Committee or collaboration with other churches for complicated and long-term problems?

Collection Of Articles From *Pastoral Care Newsletter* Available In January

Friends General Conference recognized a need for materials about the roles and responsibility of ministry and counsel and overseers. Seeing *Pastoral Care Newsletter* as an excellent resource, the Quaker Press of FGC plans to publish a volume of articles from *PCN*.

It will include articles that focus broadly on how to be a better pastoral caregiver, and on issues that our meetings face regarding membership, marriage, divorce, family, the meeting community, death and dying, conflict, and mental illness.

Look for an order form in the January issue of *PCN*.

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FRIENDS COUNSELING SERVICE

Counseling needs of members and attenders at times exceed what the meeting can provide. Within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the Friends Counseling Service is a resource available for consultation with the meeting or for referral. The counselors are active Friends whose spiritual lives are integral to their counseling. Service is not denied because of a person's lack of means.

Friends may call a counselor directly or phone Deborah Cooper, Counseling Service Coordinator, at 215-248-0489, for a referral.

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