

# Pastoral Care

## Newsletter

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

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## Speaking Truth to One Another: Addressing Theological Differences in the Meeting

*by Cathy Habschmidt*

“Telling Our Stories of Faith” was the theme of the 2004 sessions of Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting, to which my monthly meeting belongs. One evening’s plenary session consisted simply of individuals rising spontaneously from the floor to share a personal story of faith. We heard from Universalists, Christians, and people influenced by Eastern religions. I heard many expressions of appreciation for that occasion, and not a single complaint. The speakers used a wide range of language and expressed quite a diversity of beliefs, but their sincerity and faithfulness was evident to all.

It’s been six months since that evening, and I wonder how the plenary’s power is warming Friends’ spiritual lives this winter. I know from experience—as a Quaker, as a parent, and as someone involved in the pastoral care activities of my meeting—that honest exploration of our theological diversity presents opportunities for real growth. But a diversity of beliefs can help us only if we are open about our differences. The Quaker testimony of integrity calls us to be honest with one another about our various understandings of God and faith.

The benefits of this honesty extend to all segments of our meetings. We often claim that people learn about Quakerism by osmosis, but I imagine many newcomers would find it helpful to hear more about who we are and what we believe and experience. This point applies to children raised in the meeting as well. How many of our young people drift away from Quakerism in part

because they do not learn about the personal faith of the adults in their meeting? When my teenage daughter and I visited a programmed Friends meeting where Quaker author Phil Gulley was the guest pastor, she commented that she learned more about Quaker theology from Phil’s message than she had in years of attending silent worship and First Day School. “How can I learn,” she asked me, “if people don’t talk?”

### **Taking Risks: We Are Not Alone**

In many cases, people don’t talk because they are wary of using the “wrong” words. Too many Quakers practice a form of self-censorship. In an effort to avoid upsetting others, we water down our religious language and use vague words from the “safe” middle ground. We avoid claiming and proclaiming our own truths. We fear what might happen if we spoke openly about the theological diversity among us. Would some take offense and start an argument? Would others feel rejected and leave?

But we’re missing a valuable opportunity for dialogue and growth, both individual and corporate, if we shy away from talking about our personal beliefs. Discovering that some folks in our meetings worship a Goddess, while others claim Christ as their Savior, and still others look solely to the natural world for their inspiration can be both disturbing and challenging. Such a discovery, however, can also be a source of spiritual enrichment and an avenue



**CATHY HABSCHMIDT**

to a deeper relationship with one another and with the Divine.

It takes a lot of trust to make oneself this vulnerable. Talking candidly about my personal theology, using words that might make others uncomfortable, means taking risks. For example, I take a moderate risk of being labeled or misunderstood among Friends when I declare that I believe in an all-knowing personal God who is simultaneously within us and beyond us. The risk increases when I reveal that I believe in the divinity of Christ. Some might wrongly assume I believe that everyone should be a Christian, or that there is no place in our meetings for those who don't believe in God. Speaking truth to one another means being willing to take the risk of being disliked or even rejected.

There are also risks for the meeting as a whole. What if we discover religious beliefs among us that seem, at least to some, undeniably outside the boundaries of Quakerism? Will we stretch our understanding of Quaker faith? Will we endure a painful separation? Does Quakerism have boundaries, or are all beliefs acceptable? Facing these difficult questions could threaten the perceived stability of many meetings. But ignoring our differences does not change reality. These potentially troublesome issues already exist in most meetings with which I am familiar, among all branches of contemporary Quakerism.

Risk-taking, however, is nothing new for Friends. We have often been called to take risks: from refusing to remove our hats or take oaths, to going to prison for our beliefs, to working for an end to slavery and war. When the path before us seems difficult or dangerous, we support one another in love and turn to our Eternal Source for courage, inspiration, and guidance. We are not alone in our struggles.

## **The Role of Pastoral Caregivers**

Those responsible for pastoral care within a meeting have experience working with sensitive issues in an inviting and nonjudgmental way, and most importantly with guidance from the Spirit. These are precisely the qualifications needed to help individuals and meetings labor with matters of faith and theology. Pastoral caregivers can help meetings choose to face any source of actual or potential conflict, including our theological differences, in a tender and productive manner.

Caregiving committees run into theological challenges as they seek to fulfill their numerous responsibilities. How would individuals respond if we

offered to pray for them? How can we talk about God working in our lives if we don't all believe in God? How can we remain open to the movements of the Spirit if we are afraid of offending each other? How, if at all, does a person's theology enter into the membership decision? The ongoing work of pastoral caregivers becomes easier when issues of theological diversity are addressed.

What steps might a group of caregivers take if it feels led to help the meeting undertake this adventure? Before doing anything else, these Friends should reflect on their expectations. If the desire is to help the meeting come to unity on a statement of faith, then be prepared for a lot of heartache and disappointment. While it is not impossible that a meeting could be blessed with a common understanding, it is frankly unlikely.

When initiating dialogue about theological differences, our role as pastoral caregivers is to create an environment within the meeting that is safe, respectful, and encouraging. Allow the Spirit to flow freely within and among everyone in the meeting, and leave the outcome in God's hands. The idea is not to convince Friends to change their minds, but to invite everyone to share from their hearts and to listen to one another tenderly.

At the same time, we must help people understand that if they are genuinely open to the movement of the Spirit, they might find themselves experiencing an inward change of heart. Digging in one's heels and defending one's position have no place within a Friends meeting. Neither does arguing that someone else is wrong. Growth in the Spirit, moving ever closer to that Holy Center within each of us, cannot be forced or directed by the meeting. We need to enter this process expecting no change in others, but humbly being open to the possibility of change occurring in ourselves.

## **Suggestions for Assisting a Meeting**

A few years ago my meeting's ministry and oversight committee, to which I belong, felt led to begin wrestling with the issue of theological diversity. For years this issue had been an undercurrent in the life of our meeting. We would occasionally ask ourselves: "Do we have any beliefs in common?" "What is at the center of our meeting?" "What holds us together?" The meeting as a whole never attempted to come up with an answer; I think just asking the questions was scary enough. Eventually the ministry and oversight committee felt responsible for helping the meeting face these questions directly.

The committee decided that before suggesting any activities for the whole meeting, we should try them out on ourselves. Our goal was twofold: to see if the proposed process was useful and workable, and to increase the level of trust and understanding among members of the committee whose diversity was as broad as that of the meeting as a whole. We quickly agreed that responding to queries in a worship-sharing format was a helpful way to proceed.

We agreed to meet for one hour at a different time from our regular committee meetings so that we would not be rushed or distracted. Our inaugural query was whether we believed in God or some form of higher power. (Talk about jumping right in!) One person spoke about the struggles of growing up in a preacher's family and the aversion this person now feels to being told what to believe. Another shared a sense of comfort with belief in a personal God but significant discomfort with some traditional Christian tenets about God. Each of us shared deeply and openly, and when we finished we found that not a single person was offended or thought less of another! On the contrary, we all felt enriched and challenged.

Our committee now tries to meet for "spiritual nurture," as we call it, once every three months or so. At each of these meetings, we settle into worship sharing and respond to a single query. Helpful queries include:

- How has my faith changed over the course of my life?
- What is my understanding of God/Spirit/Light/etc.?
- What do I believe will happen to me after I die?
- What role, if any, does Jesus play in my spiritual life?

In our experience, such queries, used in the context of worship sharing, encourage the speaker to find the words to express her or his faith. At the same time, they help the listeners learn to hear the voice of the Spirit through language that might be different from their own.

Our committee used these experiences of spiritual reflection as a springboard for the introduction of similar opportunities for the meeting as a whole. We organized a meeting retreat and a worship sharing series on sharing about our faith. These events were well attended and we received positive feedback from many members of the meeting.

While these sessions seemed to benefit the overall health of the meeting, they did not speak to the condition of all Clear Creek Friends. Some chose not to attend because they are not comfortable talking about their faith. Nontheists and agnostics seemed particularly underrepresented in these discussions. At this point, our committee continues to seek alternative ways to include and encourage those Friends who are not drawn to the worship sharing sessions. Last year we distributed a survey asking members about their relationship with the meeting and any concerns they might have. The results, shared only with members of the ministry and oversight committee, have been helpful in discerning our way forward. We are making personal contact with each member who chose not to respond to this survey, and are exploring other ways to draw people closer to the meeting community. We know that such efforts are appreciated, but it is not yet clear if they will in some

## **A Time to Speak, A Time to Listen: Friends and the U.S. Election**

This issue of *Pastoral Care Newsletter* has been in the planning for many months, yet in the wake of the national U.S. election it seems particularly timely that Friends reflect on our ability to speak of our beliefs as well as on our ability to listen deeply to beliefs that differ from our own.

On both sides of the election there were assertions that *they* are dangerous and don't understand the moral values that are at the heart of our democracy. There is a perception of a great chasm of fear and misunderstanding dividing Americans from one another.

Joe Volk of Friends Committee on National Legislation proposes that America needs a process for rebuilding a civil unity among us, a unity that affirms our common values. He suggests that "one avenue toward hope may be to seek a new dialogue among liberal and evangelical religious communities on our differing cultural and religious values."

So, dear Friends, we commend this issue of *PCN* to you. May we begin practicing within our meetings to listen deeply to one another's discoveries of the workings of the Divine Spirit, whatever the language with which it is expressed. And then may we go out into the world to listen for that of God in others with whom we think we disagree. If we listen deeply and with open hearts and minds, perhaps we will discover the bridges that cross the electoral chasm.

—*PCN Editorial Committee*

## Preparing for Sharing

Pastoral caregivers should not be discouraged if they encounter resistance to their efforts to bring theological diversity out into the open and make it a safe and natural topic of conversation. Caregivers can address the reasons for any hesitation in a loving yet probing manner. Consider asking your meeting to reflect together in worship sharing on queries such as these:

- How can I talk about my beliefs if I'm not at all sure what I really do believe?
- Do I think that the tension about theological diversity in our meeting would get better or worse if we started talking openly about our beliefs?
- How does my religious experience as a child or young adult affect how I react now to discussions of personal faith?
- Which makes me more anxious: sharing my own beliefs, or hearing from those with beliefs different from mine?
- What could we gain individually and as a meeting by sharing openly about our deepest beliefs?
- What is the worst thing that could happen if we all start talking about our faith?

indirect way nourish a culture of rich and inclusive theological exploration within the meeting. We proceed in faith, following the light we are given.

The "Why I Come to Meeting" column in our newsletter is a simple and widely appreciated activity that doesn't involve attending extra meetings or (unless you're that month's author) speaking out about your faith. Each month the committee asks a member or attender to write a short paragraph on this topic for submission to the newsletter editor. Nobody is pressured to write if they'd rather not, and we strive for a broad diversity of voices.

Our adult religious education committee also sponsors events that help us get to know each other at a deeper level. We used to call these occasions "Spiritual Journey Sharing," but the name intimidated some people so we recently changed it to "Building Community Through Getting to Know Ourselves." The adult religious education committee asks two individuals to come prepared to talk for twenty minutes about their

life journeys. By asking two people to share each time, we try to reduce the anxiety level for the presenters.

Another activity to help a meeting explore its theological diversity is a book discussion group. Reading and reflecting on stories of other people's faith journeys is usually easier than talking directly about one's own beliefs. A book group can be a starting point for the more challenging work of sharing what individuals in the meeting personally believe.

## The Challenge of Language

Tension around religious language is very real in many Quaker circles. Many Friends avoid using words they fear may offend others, such as Jesus Christ, Wicca, Lord, or Goddess. I often wonder how frequently Friends really do take offense and ask others to modify their language, and to what extent we are being overly cautious.

Take this article, for example. I have chosen not to hide my faith behind vague words. I am someone who believes in God, and several of my comments assume the existence of God. I strongly believe that we are all strengthened when individuals use whatever religious language is right for them, without apologies or disclaimers. As we draw closer together, we get used to hearing language different from our own without jumping to the conclusion that the speaker is judging us if we believe differently. We cannot learn from one another if we all sound the same.

We are all aware of people in our meetings who have been wounded at some time by harsh religious language, and we wish to protect them from further harm. However, instead of censoring our language, wouldn't it be better to model for each other a more loving and open-minded way to talk about faith? Pastoral caregivers can play an important role in creating this zone of safety.

Caregivers can also help the meeting notice and avoid the temptation to categorize people. Sometimes we quickly decide a person is "one of *them*" and stop listening to that Friend's unique voice. None of us, however, can fit in a tidy box. Not all Christians are fundamentalists, and not all nontheists are heretics. Labels we assign to others can block us from perceiving the spark of the divine in each of us.

## The Difference This Process Makes

Facing our theological diversity involves taking big risks. It may feel safer to keep quiet and not stir up controversy, but then we lose a valuable opportunity for

personal and corporate growth. The world today is increasingly at war, in both the cultural and the military sense. The Religious Society of Friends has a vital role to play, but we must continue to grow and learn if we want to be healthy and effective. If we can learn to listen tenderly and respectfully to Friends with whom we may have strong disagreements, and if we can learn to trust one another deeply enough to reveal our innermost thoughts, then we can model for the rest of the world the first steps toward peaceful resolution of all our human conflicts. And we can grow closer to that Source that draws us together as Friends. ■

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## Questions for Reflection

1. To what extent does our meeting provide a safe, encouraging atmosphere in which people can talk about their personal beliefs? How many of us find ways to participate in such conversations? How do we include the youth in these opportunities?
2. How well do we understand the deeply held beliefs of people in our meeting?
3. How directly do we acknowledge the level of theological diversity in our meeting? Is our diversity seen as a challenge or as a gift by most of the meeting?
4. What can we do to nurture openness and integrity in our meeting around the topic of sharing our personal beliefs? What obstacles might we anticipate encountering?
5. Have we noticed any connections between how we talk with each other about matters of faith, and our witness in the world? How can we encourage each other to speak and listen with truth, love and boldness both within the meeting and beyond it?

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### UPCOMING ISSUES IN 2005

- The Importance of Archives (March)
- Disruption and Disruptiveness (June)
- Supporting High School Age Friends (September)

## Resources

Our lead article suggests, "Reading and reflecting on stories of other people's faith journeys is usually easier than talking directly about one's own beliefs." Here a few titles which Friends involved in this issue of PCN have found useful in this regard. All are available from Quaker Books of FGC (800-966-4556 or [www.quakerbooks.org](http://www.quakerbooks.org)) except as noted.

### Book-Length Spiritual Journey Narratives

- Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, by Kathleen Norris. Riverhead Books, 1999.
- Leadings: A Catholic's Journey through Quakerism*, by Irene Lape. Brazos Press, 2003.
- The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence. Templegate, 1991 (originally published late 1600s).
- A Testament of Devotion*, by Thomas R. Kelly. HarperCollins, 1996 (originally published 1941).
- Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, by Anne Lamott. Anchor Books, 1999.

### Quaker Pamphlets and Periodicals

- I Have Always Wanted to be Jewish and Now, Thanks to the Religious Society of Friends, I Am*, by Claire Gorfinkel. Pendle Hill Publications, 2000.
- A Journey Through Skepticism*, by Roland L. Warren. Pendle Hill Publications, 2002.
- A Quaker In The Zendo*, by Steve Smith. Pendle Hill Publications, 2004.
- Varieties of Religious Experience: An Adventure in Listening*. Quaker Universalist Fellowship, 2003 (originally published 1990). Available online at [www.universalistfriends.org/varieties.html](http://www.universalistfriends.org/varieties.html)
- What Canst Thou Say?* Sample issue online at [www.geocities.com/what\\_canst\\_thou\\_say/](http://www.geocities.com/what_canst_thou_say/). Subscription info: WCTS, c/o Margaret Willits, P.O. Box 5082, Sonora, CA 95370

### "How To" Pamphlets

- Creative Listening: Quaker Dialogue*, by Claremont (CA) Monthly Meeting, 1991.
- Sharing Our Faith*, by Daniel Seeger. Quaker Press of FGC, 1991.

### Theological Diversity Among Quakers

- Can We All Be Friends?* Thirty minute DVD video by Coleman Watts and Betsy Blake, 2004. Available through the online shop of the website of the World Gathering of Young Friends: <http://shop.wgyf.org/>
- An Experiment in Faith: Quaker Women Transcending Differences*, by Margery Post Abbott. Pendle Hill Publications, 1995.

## One Meeting's Experience:

# Exploring our Beliefs and Experiences

by Patricia Finley

Last spring, twenty Friends gathered one evening at Old Haverford Meeting (Havertown, PA) for worship sharing to consider the way we understand "religion" in a Quaker context. We met not to heal a broken meeting but to grow in the strength our differences give us.

The impetus for coming together to deliberate on this particular subject was that some of us seemed reticent to speak of our differences when it concerned spiritual matters. Moreover, though the Religious Society of Friends is traditionally and historically a Christian religion, the members and attenders of OHM follow very diverse paths to their truth in accordance with their own inner light. Our worship sharing experience that night was explicitly structured to encourage participants to make a concerted effort to move beyond their reticence to speak and to do so in the context of a meeting for worship.

As a meeting we have engaged the worship sharing process at least three times before, once for visioning for our monthly meeting and twice in the last two years to consider the Peace Testimony. The most satisfying aspect of worship sharing is that its structure encourages deep listening and speaking fully, and allows us to experience the deeply spiritual nature of Quaker process at work. Each time we close a worship sharing session, many Friends report feeling transformed and in unity as a meeting.

On this particular spring evening we chose to engage in a task that was particularly difficult: to put into words what is usually beyond language. In order to speak in an articulate manner of our experiences of the inner light, we inevitably must organize what we think and feel. In the process I know that I came closer to clarifying what was most real to me. By listening deeply to others I learned of other spiritual paths and

now understand with more depth what I already knew but could not articulate. In a sense what happened that evening is that we provided a kind of ministry to ourselves and to each other. In the deepest sense this is Quaker process and it is the way we experience continuing revelation.

The Religious Society of Friends does not prescribe any particular dogma or creed but individual Friends do have beliefs. Those beliefs often exist on a wide continuum from deeply Christian to a kind of ethical secularism. That evening, Old Haverford Friends spoke of their beliefs, their spiritual yearnings, how they satisfied those yearnings, what they found comfortable or disquieting in their own and others beliefs, and whether Quaker faith and Quaker practices were sufficient to resolve all their spiritual needs.

The precise details of what was said that evening are irrelevant and confidential. What is relevant is the process. By now, eighteen months later, individual beliefs may have changed or evolved, clarified or deepened. What is clear to me is that our differences are a ministry that allows us to see our own beliefs in another context. That evening we reaffirmed that our differences do not separate us. That evening we ministered to each other and derived a greater unity and a spiritual deepening. That evening I left the meeting with a sense of joy and a reverence for the community with whom I share my spiritual life. ■

*Pat Finley clerks for Old Haverford's Overseers Committee and serves on the Peace and Concerns Standing Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. (About the committee name, Pat comments, "We are discussing a name change but have not yet reached unity regarding the call for a change from 'Overseers' to 'Pastoral Care.'")*

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