

Intervisitation Program of Baltimore Yearly Meeting Report to Interim Meeting - 10th month 22, 2011

"When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." Genesis 9:16 NRSV

Among the rainbows in the cloud of Friends are those of us who visit with other Friends, those of us who welcome and provide hospitality to our visitors here, those of us who do administrative work to facilitate visiting, and those of us who provide support through companioning and prayer. In this passage from Genesis, we help transform the bow from an instrument of violence into a rainbow sign of hope and renewal, a reminder that our covenant of peace will not be broken – that a relationship of mutual responsibility exists with God and among us.¹

The cloud of the wider community of Friends provides the BYM Intervisitation Program many opportunities to be rainbows. Many Friends today struggle to find how we can remain in community with other Friends who believe or practice their faith in ways different from our own. Some of this struggle involves disagreements about fundamental tenets of our faith and practice. Outgoing FGC General Secretary Bruce Birchard, in his farewell address at this year's Gathering, shared his vision of this: **"We are called to love one another and to be reconciled to one another.....We should not break our relationships with FUM. Among other things, deepening the splits within our North American Friends community would undermine the opportunities we may have to offer a clear but caring witness about this very important matter. We would not be living love."**

BYM's Intervisitation Program has arrived at a crossroads after six years of serving as a BYM witness of our peaceful and loving presence within FUM's yearly meeting community. Is it time for our ministry of presence to lay itself down? Is our work done? Or is it time to alter our mission and focus? Are we called to offer our insights and support to other FUM yearly meetings so they can provide similar witnesses? Or to offer it still more widely, within FWCC or other organizations?

As we prepared for a workshop about BYM's Intervisitation program at FUM's Triennial in Ohio this summer, we considered these questions. Energy for our work was dissipating, BYM was reducing our program funding for 2012, and our path forward was unclear. Should this rainbow fade away or transform itself? At the Triennial, other FUM Friends told us how important our witness has been to them, and some asked if they could join us at our trainings, so they could learn how to do this service themselves. There was strong appreciation and interest in this "ministry of presence". We came back to our annual sessions with renewed enthusiasm and energy.

At our own Annual Sessions, we found Friends from BYM and elsewhere also responding with enthusiasm, further strengthening our commitment to this witness. It was clear to us that God was not yet done with our program.

At our Annual Sessions, we offered a time for sharing and further discernment during our evening hospitality sessions that began at 9:15 PM. Each evening many visitors and welcomers were able to reflect on their days and experiences, and a shared sense of community emerged out of our diversity. The fact that ours was the only place on campus to get tea and snacks at that time of night only helped our process of connecting with each other.

Our process of program discernment continued on October 1, when about 15 Friends gathered at Adelphi Meeting for prayer and reflection about the call and direction of the program. Two queries framed the day:

- Where has the program brought us? And,
- God, are we done yet?

We affirmed that this program has helped Friends open their hearts and minds to Friends both similar to and different from ourselves. And that this has enriched and deepened us spiritually. It was clear that we do not yet feel done. However, we do not yet have a long term vision for the program. There is clarity, however, for our next step – to respond to Friends' invitation to provide them with training on how we do this Intervisitation ministry of presence. We need to explore how to fund this work given the reduced 2012 budget. Notes from this listening session are available to BYM and other Friends.

Our discernment process continues on **November 19, 2011, at Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting with lunch at 1:00 and Meeting for Discernment from 2 to 4:-00.** All Friends are invited to join us or to hold us in prayer. Our communication process has been streamlined through use of various Google tools. We invite Friends to sign up on the sheet circulating if you want to be notified of activities, serve on the committee, or feel led to be a visitor, a companion/elder, or provide hospitality.

I close with comments from two visitors this summer. Many of you will recognize their names and some of you may have been blessed by the many gifts they shared with us at Annual Sessions.

"Thank you! This, my 2nd year, is just as exciting as the first. I am thankful for the opportunity to gather again with you. I pray that our continued relationships will strengthen both BYM and GPYM. May we continue down this path, eyes wide open, to all that the creator sets before us." Peace, Aaron Fowler, Great Plains Yearly Meeting

"What a powerful witness and presence the Intervisitation Program is. What shape and direction it will take is yet to be realized – but we stand with you in expectant waiting, trusting this is not the end but a new beginning." With Gratitude, Laura Dungan, Presiding Clerk, Great Plains Yearly Meeting

Joan Dyer Liversidge, Co-Clerk

¹The Renovare' Spiritual Formation Bible, Richard J. Foster, et. Al, 2005

²Friends Journal, November, 2011, Meeting at the Center: The retiring head of Friends General Conference looks at the divisions among Friends, p. 6-10.