

Faith and Practice Visit

Richmond Friends Meeting

April 7, 2013

16 Richmond Friends were present. Sheila Bach presented and Riley Robinson took notes.

Friends began the meeting while eating a light lunch together. It was agreed that that we would proceed in worship sharing, using the queries from the handout.

Understanding that our faith is too deep for words, does the Faith & Practice adequately articulate our Quaker beliefs and testimonies, in order both to inform those new to Friends and to inspire and challenge those with long experience of Friends?

There was a long silence. It was asked if it would be helpful to hand out copies of the 2012 draft *Faith and Practice* for reference. Friends agreed, and this was done.

- A Friend said that she had not read the entire volume. She appreciated that it's very comprehensive, but found it daunting. She said simply "this looks like a lot of effort." She said "I didn't feel compelled to read it all then, but then I didn't go back either to read it later." However, she had looked over the religious education section and found some good ideas there and liked the added materials. She is experienced in this area.
- Another Friend said "I wanted to know how the book would address the depth and breadth of BYM members' theology, and I found that it was inclusive. The way the quotes were done helped. It was a good way to reflect our diversity." Other Friends agreed with the statement.
- Another Friend said that as a librarian, she found that the table of contents is excellent, and that she found what she wanted quickly. In the back she liked the dates and the list of books. She said the list would be very helpful for the Meeting library in terms of updating the collection. She asked where the book list came from. Sheila answered that it was assembled by the committee.
- Another Friend appreciated the glossary as very helpful to newcomers.
- A Friend asked if the book will be produced in a spiral-bound form, saying that for this kind of book that is much handier. Sheila agreed about the purpose of the book, saying that it is useful to think about it as a handbook.

- A Friend noticed that the definition of Universalism is one often used by Friends, but is not the only definition, and is in conflict with definitions used in some of the religious groups. She noted that in some religious groups, universalism means that everyone is going to get into heaven. She offered to send some writing to the Committee.

Does the Faith & Practice provide sufficient resources, such as queries and advices, to assist us in accountability one to another in our Monthly Meetings and as a Yearly Meeting?

- The Clerk of the Meeting said that she enjoyed reading the queries and said that the Meeting has been using both the queries and voices from month-to-month. She liked the draft section on Family and she liked the sample letters in the back that can be very helpful in conducting matters of business.
- The Clerk pointed out, however, that recently a member had committed suicide, and “it hit the foundation of our Meeting.” She was looking for something helpful in the line of “support in difficult times,” but really didn’t find anything to help the Meeting deal with its grief. It was pointed out that, in the past, some Quakers have written eloquently about grief, and that perhaps there would be a way to address this.
- The Clerk expressed appreciation for all the work that is going into the *Faith and Practice* project.
- A Friend noted that the queries need to work for two audiences, those new to Friends and experienced Friends. The book as a whole is quite large and can be intimidating, and the Friend wondered if part of it could be published as a subset. Sheila said that the committee now expects to publish the section on the Life of the Spirit, queries and Voices separately.
- A Friend noted that the paragraph at the bottom of page 20 says “the passion of friends is not in limiting or directing seekers to a particular truth, a common path. The passion of Friends is in gathering in community to seek the truth all of us humbly listening for the promptings of the spirit.” He then noted that the paragraph also says “we are not each alone in a world of our own truth but united in a common light of the same spirit.” He felt that there might be some conflict in those two statements. When someone is seeking to learn about Quakerism, answers may be given on the basis of one individual’s truth, or may be represented as a larger truth shared by many or all Friends. This reader felt that the first two sentences worked well for him.

- Riley said that BYM needs to set some limits based on the centuries of accumulated experience of Friends and on the shared values and testimonies of Friends, adding that the RDPF is not a situation where “anything goes.”
- A Friend did note that we need to share and hold and explain these truths without being dogmatic.
- One Friend said that she was not sure quite what that whole paragraph means.
- One Friend offered that we all drink from the same well of truth, but the flavor comes to each of us differently
- A Friend said, “When I hear it, it evokes the experience of worshiping together, and of that being foundational in our community.”
- A Friend said, “I remember that my experience of the truth simply my experience.”

Does the Faith & Practice provide sufficient explanation and guidance for our Quaker process?

- A Friend had read the description of committees and committee functions and noted that Richmond Friends Meeting’s committee structure does not quite conform to that. Sheila noted that Monthly Meetings often choose committee structures modified from what the Yearly Meeting has for itself. She noted that there is a disclaimer in the book in which Monthly Meetings can make these choices.
- The mention of youth safety on page 164 was appreciated. A long discussion evolved out of this about the importance of youth safety. It wasn’t that anyone disagreed, but rather a discussion of what may be required of the Meeting at this time to create a safe environment for all, to satisfy the legal standards and to satisfy the insurance company. Baltimore Yearly Meeting approved a youth safety policy a few years ago and has found it necessary to update it. The update is in process now and a draft was presented at March Interim Meeting. It was noted that BYM does not require member Monthly Meetings to adhere to its policies with exactitude, but rather recommends that they use the policy as a template for their needs. It was pointed out that the laws have become stricter, that in some states every single individual is a mandatory reporter of an event, and that events can be reported that occurred years ago. Meetings need to have practices in accord with

the prevailing laws. Every Meeting needs to proactively create an environment that is as safe as possible for every person. A Meeting needs to be aware of this and to have a set of procedures in place that are adequate. It was not clear to all present that the current mention of the issue in F&P is adequate.

- Another Friend said that the queries, advices and voices are “wonderful”
- A Friend brought up the subject of clearness for marriage. She notes that in the book there is recognition about the distinction between Quaker marriage as opposed to legal marriage, and that clearness committees are asked to talk with couples about understanding both of those. She pointed out, however, that in the actual marriage procedure section it seems to presume that the couple will only want a marriage with the legal process. Perhaps there’s some wording that could help with that. Richmond Friends Meeting has been discussing this distinction at length and finds the book statement rather “black and white.” The discussion has gone past simply LGBTQ marriage issues and onto a wider discussion about marriage and the law. Friends asked that the book leave some wiggle room, seeing this as an evolving topic. There was the desire to continue informing couples of how to do legal marriage for those who so desire.
- Some procedural questions came up. Should the issue of a marriage come to the full Monthly Meeting first, or to the responsible committee? Sheila and Riley suggested that, on that level of procedure, the Monthly Meeting could probably decide. It was also noted that BYM indicates that the couple’s letter of application for marriage be read to the entire Meeting for Business. Richmond does not do that. The response was that the marriage becomes an element of the Meeting community, and that there is a mutually supportive relationship ongoing between the Meeting and the married couple. The letters are a way of more fully introducing the couple to the Meeting.
- There was discussion about the ongoing relationship between the Meeting and a couple. It was said that some Meetings are more articulate than others about how that is accomplished. There is the tension between respecting the privacy of the couple and the desire of the Meeting to be supportive of a couple if it appears that a distance is occurring. It is known that when a divorce happens sometimes both members leave the Meeting. One way to handle this is to have clear processes in place visible to all who seek help as a couple. This could include being very clear that clearness committees can be formed, for example. It was noted that one Meeting has developed a statement about how the Meeting needs to be respectful, aware and as supportive as possible in the event of a divorce.

- Also on the topic of marriage, one Friend noticed that the old F&P says all members are invited to attend the Meeting for Worship with Concern for Marriage. The new one doesn't seem to have that wording. Sheila said that that omission was not made on purpose and that Meeting for Worship is open to everyone. It was also noted that not everyone need be invited to the reception.

Does Faith & Practice provide guidance and structure while inviting the work of the Spirit and continuing revelation?

- A Friend wanted to comment that the role of the book is to balance guidance and structure with continuing Revelation, and that it does a good job of that.
- Friends simply said, emphatically, "yes."