

**Keeping The Unity
Of The Spirit
In The
Bond Of Peace**

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(Conservative)**

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Introduction

by Kent Wicker

This issue of our journal was born of a panel discussion at our 2014 Annual Sessions in Greensboro, North Carolina. The panel took as its theme Paul's counsel, in Ephesians 4:3, to make every effort to keep "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The discussion focused on the ways in which North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) has sought to maintain unity while accommodating difference and change.

It has managed to do so largely, I believe, by placing attention to that Spirit at the center of its collective life and identity. As Lloyd Lee Wilson notes in his essay here, "the immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit" is "the one essential" that all Friends in this yearly meeting see as its defining quality.

This is apparent not only in the deep quality of worship that is possible among North Carolina Conservative Friends, but in the worshipful, open, and often loving way that they can conduct business. In her essay, Carole Edgerton Treadway observes of this yearly meeting that it is "more important for the issue to be

considered in right order than for there to be a decision.” Good process builds trust and openness among Friends – and reflects that trust in God which can require letting go of our own assumptions and understandings. A business meeting undertaken in such a manner can draw even Friends of differing minds into closer community. If openness to Divine guidance and careful attention to right practice are at the heart of a meeting’s habits, there is less opportunity for divergent perspectives, opinions or language to be seen as anything but merely human differences – differences that cannot disrupt the more fundamental Truth that binds us.

That “bond of peace” can seem elusive in these times of renewed dissension and disunity among Friends. It is therefore worth considering how this unity, trust and openness can be maintained. This volume represents an attempt to share some of the experiences of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) in its attempts to do so.

Three of these essays represent written versions of oral testimony delivered at the 2014 panel discussion. Rachel Anne Miller, who grew up in this yearly meeting, speaks of her experience of eldering as a form of nurturing relationship. Lloyd Lee Wilson traces the ways in which maintaining unity while allowing for difference have been central principles of Friends in this yearly meeting. Carole Edgerton Treadway recounts, from the perspective of a Friend raised in a different Conservative yearly meeting, her impressions of NCYM-C as it has changed over the years.

The other two essays recount meaningful incidents in the recent history of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) in which issues that might have led to strife instead became sources of deeper trust and unity. Gwen Gosney Erickson traces how this yearly meeting responded to the decision by some member

meetings to perform same-sex marriages, and how that process has since come to represent a positive, defining narrative for many Friends in NCYM-C. Deborah Shaw tells the story of how her monthly and yearly meetings came to offer her family deep love and support during a dark time of addiction and incarceration.

Taken together, these essays reflect some of the core values of our yearly meeting. In them, we get a sense of a people brought together in a nurturing community, grounded in a shared history and Truth that allows them – however imperfectly -- to move forward into unknown territory open to each other and to wherever God may lead them.

Kent Wicker is a member of Durham Friends Meeting in Durham, North Carolina.

The Lovingkindness of Eldering

by Rachel Anne Miller

For the past decade, I have lived in Massachusetts, while maintaining my membership at Greenville Monthly Meeting, which is the meeting I grew up in. My home meeting is currently very small and has never been large. My meeting relied heavily on the support and spiritual nurture of the Yearly Meeting, and as a child, I was taken to Sessions every year, as well as Representative Body on a regular basis. If there were no other kids my age around, I would attend business sessions.

In some ways, the Yearly Meeting is like an extended family to me. It's not hard to think of individuals I've known since I was six like aunts or grandparents. I've got an index card with Dixie Newlin's persimmon pudding recipe on my fridge and I love that David Brown still catches my eye before worship to make faces at me after almost thirty years. I promise I'm able to sit through worship without that sort of amusement now.

Aside from the personal relationships, though, the Yearly Meeting continues to provide me with guidance and support. Some of that is in the form of direct spiritual nurture. I know that there are any number of people whom I can contact for help with discernment on small or large issues. I also know that at any time I might get a call or email asking me to do something specific for the yearly meeting, based on someone else's leading or simply their faith that I have the ability to do something that could be useful. I have been sustained and challenged by the feedback I've received on my endeavors, and I am so grateful for it.

I am also grateful for the memories I have of watching the way my Yearly Meeting has maintained a tradition of eldering that is grounded in the love we have for each other. In my encounters with non-Conservative Friends I have seen individuals speak about eldering as a form of chastisement from older Friends, entrenched in the Way We've Always Done It. Given that we are Conservative Friends and maintain a fair number of traditional customs, they can be forgiven for believing we hold on to this one because we are deeply opposed to innovation or change. Perhaps our practice of eldering changed over the years to become something kinder and more useful, or their practices became more contentious and were laid down in official ways when they became more divisive than useful. I don't know what the history is and given the concise and somewhat sterile way in which much of our Society's minutes have been written over the years, I doubt that we could really be sure. Regardless of how we ended up with such different concepts of eldering, modern conversations about it quickly raise hackles in many Quaker circles and it's almost as if we're using the same word for two completely different things.

The eldering that I am familiar with is a long-term relationship. It is a form of mentoring and spiritual guidance. It is encouragement and discernment. It is questions like “how is the Spirit working with thee these days?” over sweet tea, more than it is criticisms about vocal ministry. When criticisms do come, they come from love, with a long history of conversation behind them, deep conversations about where ministry comes from, about what we believe and what we are called to do. I have been surprised several times at memorial services to hear about the kind of eldering the recently departed had done and for whom, but never by the love and gratitude from the person who had been elderd. There is a lot of relationship that has to be built before that kind of criticism can be received with love and recalled at a memorial, and all of that relationship is eldering. Our practice of eldering is about building up, not tearing down.

It is true that a great many of these relationships seem to be examples of an older person passing wisdom down to the next generation, but I suspect that part of this is that much of these relationships are private, intimate, and ongoing in a way that feels inappropriate to talk about in detail while both parties are still living. It is also certainly the case that, as with many spiritual gifts, they grow stronger with practice, and the practice of building long-term relationships necessarily takes time. We hold up our elders and even recognize their gifts officially by recording them in some meetings, but by and large, the eldering happens in relationship with one another. These relationships are three-sided. There has to be an openness to each other, but also to God. The elder must acknowledge the gifts of the person who is being supported and nurtured and the person receiving the eldering must acknowledge that the person doing the eldering has the wisdom and clarity of mind to see the

situation as it is. Both must also acknowledge that the eldering is both from God and towards God. It's about helping an individual become the person that God wants them to be, to help them live a life worthy of their own calling. While this sort of mentoring relationship can be useful in other parts of our lives, it lacks the weight of eldering if it lacks the underlying current directing us all towards the Kingdom.

These relationships allow us to trust in each other, regardless of age, to discern God's will, even when we are unsure of it ourselves. When I was in my late teens, I was at a Representative Body session where the Yearly Meeting was trying to decide if we should have a website. This session was being held in West Grove's clapboard meetinghouse, which does not have indoor plumbing to this day. I remember being amused that some of the older representatives really did not seem to be able to understand the concept of the Internet, which was probably unfair of me given that they lived the majority of their lives without it. I also remember being amazed when Alfred Newlin, then in his early seventies, stood up and admitted that he did not understand what a website was, but that he trusted that the people who were suggesting one had the best interests of the Yearly Meeting at heart and thought we should go forward.

The trust that Alfred Newlin spoke of was trust in God, in the corporate body of NCYM-C's Representative Body, and in the individuals he had loved and ministered and eldered over many years. This trust allowed him to feel comfortable moving forward towards an online presence for our yearly meeting, an online presence that carries forward to this day. He could not have foreseen that there would be people who would read our Faith and Practice online before ever having met another Friend. As the internet

continues to alter the ways in which humans interact with each other, we must find a way to hold onto the valuable practice of eldering, of long term relationships built on helping each other grow in Grace, even as our communities become more diffuse and interconnected.

The value of our practice of eldering is not in the words or the naming. It's not in the sweet tea or the clapboard meetinghouses. The value isn't limited to our geography, or our tradition. It isn't limited to the descendants of the Newlins and the Browns. The value of our practice is that through longstanding, loving relationships with each other, each focused on being as faithful as possible in each moment to the Will of God, we can all grow in Grace together, becoming more perfect each day as we work towards realizing the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Rachel Anne Miller is a member of Greenville Monthly Meeting and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Historical Background and Spiritual Characteristics of North Carolina Conservative Friends

*What Does It Mean to Be a Conservative Friend in North
Carolina?*

Lloyd Lee Wilson

One of the distinctive characteristics of North Carolina Conservative Friends, stretching back before the separation of 1903, is expressed in the last sentence of the Advices in our *Discipline*:

“Be faithful and steadfast ... endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”¹

That comes from the first sentence in the fourth chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians:

I encourage you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (NRSV)

¹ This was the theme of the 316th yearly meeting sessions in 2013.

Unity of the Spirit

Over the more than three hundred years that Friends have been active in North Carolina, this principle has been put into practice repeatedly, in that NC Friends have consistently valued the unity of community over theological uniformity. We may not actually celebrate our diversity, as some Quaker groups do, but we do value fellowship with each other more than we value the idea of limiting our meetings to people who think and believe just the way that we do.

An excellent example of a situation in which North Carolina Friends made that kind of choice occurred at the time of the Hicksite separations in 1827, when Friends chose to remain united rather than to separate. North Carolina didn't have some of the urban-rural tensions that existed in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, but there was certainly a range of theological belief. The majority of North Carolina Friends were probably more comfortable with traditional Quaker theology, but there were Friends who were open to and willing to listen to and participate in the de-emphasis of Scripture and outward reality of the historical Jesus that were being discussed by those who came to be known as Hicksites.

More important than theological disputes was that no one on either side felt the need to try to sort out the wheat from the tares. The yearly meeting was more comfortable living together with its differences than in separating. No group split off to form North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Hicksite), as had happened in Philadelphia and other yearly meetings to the north. From this point, North Carolina Yearly Meeting was known as an "Orthodox" yearly meeting -- simply a label to indicate that they had not separated.

A second conscious decision valuing unity over purity occurred at the time of the Gurneyite-Wilburite separations in 1845. These resulted in the formation of Wilburite yearly meetings in New England, New York, Ohio, and Baltimore.² The basis of these separations was symbolized by two charismatic personalities. New England weighty Friend John Wilbur said the prominent English Friend J. J. Gurney deviated from George Fox and therefore was wrong in his teaching and preaching. Wilbur and those who supported him held that if one changed from the historic understanding of what George Fox had taught, one was *ipso facto* wrong. Wilburite Friends in New England and Ohio separated from the existing Orthodox yearly meetings there to form new yearly meetings in opposition to Gurney's ideas. Ohio Wilburites also became known for their firm opposition to education beyond the "three R's".

North Carolina Friends had heard Joseph John Gurney's ideas for themselves when he traveled through the state in the ministry in 1837. They adopted what was helpful in his teaching, including the establishment of First Day Schools,³ and they ignored the rest -- including his low opinion of the shad he was served by Friends in Rich Square Monthly Meeting.

The commitment to education among North Carolina Friends contrasted with the distrust in the Wilburite meetings. Friends in this yearly meeting will recall the story of Friends School in Virginia Beach in 1954, which was established immediately following the establishment of the monthly meeting, while the new

² The new meeting in Baltimore was never viable. It consisted of 12 Friends, six men and six women, who met as a yearly meeting for only a few years.

³ Also called Sabbath Day Schools.

meeting house was still under construction. The first classes were held on the sand dunes at the oceanfront, until the meeting house basement was completed and teachers and students could move indoors. Ninety-odd years earlier, when a new Cedar Grove Preparative Meeting was established in Woodland, NC, Friends there also started their own school before building their meeting house.

Although the majority of North Carolina Friends were not dismissive of Gurney's teachings simply because they might differ from George Fox's, there was a minority group attracted to the Wilburite idea of a purified faith. The sister and brother-in-law of the yearly meeting clerk at the time had traveled to New England to meet with the newly separated Wilburites there, and returned impressed. They and other Friends were convinced that recognizing this new meeting as authentically Quaker would be the right thing to do. They persuaded the North Carolina Yearly Meeting clerk, Thomas Hunt, to read the epistle from the Wilburite yearly meeting in New England during the North Carolina yearly meeting sessions.

Among Quakers at that time, only one authentic Quaker yearly meeting could represent a geographic area. A yearly meeting corresponded, through its epistles, only with other authentic Quaker meetings. To read the epistle from the Wilburite yearly meeting would by definition label the majority of Friends in New England, who remained in the orthodox yearly meeting, as false Quakers. Such an action would surely create a parallel separation in North Carolina, since most Friends here were not ready to take such a drastic action.

The night before the business session at which epistles would be heard, Thomas Hunt's father Nathan Hunt, himself a former yearly meeting clerk, met with representatives of both sides: those who supported the Wilburites and those who did not. After

each had had their say, Nathan stayed awake praying for much of the rest of the night. At the crucial point the next day, when Thomas Hunt as clerk stood to read the Wilburite epistle, Nathan rose in the body of the meeting and said firmly, "Thomas -- sit down!" Nathan then proceeded to give ministry on the importance of unity among Friends that, as West Grove Friend Alfred Newlin would have said, left the floor wet with tears. The Wilburite epistle was never read, and North Carolina Friends avoided an almost certain split.^{4,5}

North Carolina Friends again chose unity at the time of the "second wave" Conservative separations in the 1870s. Unlike the first wave Wilburite separations, this second wave was a response to the inroads into Quaker circles of the Evangelical movement sweeping across the entire country at that time. These separations created four more yearly meetings with the Conservative label: Iowa, Western, Kansas, and Canada. The objections leading to these separations concerned the growing use among Quakers of revival meetings complete with prepared sermons, mourning benches, altar calls, and extreme emotionalism.

Issues that had been important to the Wilburites were not central to these separations: complete adherence to Fox's doctrines, plain dress and speech, remaining seated during public prayer, and allowing non-members to attend "select" meetings. North Carolina Yearly Meeting was not uniformly opposed to these innovations, but Friends here agreed to disagree. Meetings in Eastern Quarter, including Rich Square, said they did not want to participate in the revivals; the yearly meeting agreed that they would not have to take

⁴ Holden, David E. W. 1988. *Friends Divided: Conflict and Division in the Society of Friends*. Richmond: Friends United Press, p. 127.

⁵ Jay, Allen, *Autobiography of Allen Jay*, The John C. Winston Co., 1910, pp. 121-125.

part. The rest of the yearly meeting would sponsor and pay for evangelical work including these revival meetings, but Friends in Eastern Quarter would not be expected to participate or support them financially. Once again, North Carolina Friends had decided to find a way to live together rather than to separate over their differences.

By the beginning of the 20th century, North Carolina was the only yearly meeting in North America not to have undergone schism or to have been created by a schism.⁶ At about that time, a third challenge faced Friends in North Carolina: an organized effort to establish theological unity in the yearly meeting. The yearly meeting had adopted the *Uniform Discipline* in the face of a lack of unity on the decision to do so. It had also adopted the Richmond Declaration in the same fashion, and had begun to interfere with the local recording of ministers and appointment of elders by monthly meetings. When the dissatisfaction of Friends in Eastern Quarter over these issues became apparent, the yearly meeting attempted to solve the problem by appointing a committee which had the authority, under the Uniform Discipline, to act as if they were members of the meeting they were visiting.

This time, Friends were unable to preserve the unity of their community. A group of Friends who opposed the intrusion of centralized theological perspective and authority into the local meetings reorganized themselves into what we know as North Carolina Yearly Meeting – Conservative – the sole “third wave” separator among the Conservative yearly meetings. North Carolina Friends had been willing to live and let live on the issues of the

⁶ Hickey, Damon D. 1997. *Sojourners No More: The Quakers in the New South 1865-1920*. Greensboro: North Carolina Friends Historical Society and North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends (FUM), p. 69.

earlier separations, taking the decision to separate only when the larger faction in the yearly meeting pressed for uniformity in ways contrary to historical practice.

During the past century, North Carolina Conservative Friends have made a continued effort to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace." Our desire for unity in the present day finds expression in the practice of Radical Hospitality -- a genuine welcome to all who are warmed by the spiritual fire, without putting prior constraints on their participation.⁷ We attempt to be welcoming to anyone who is warmed by the fire of our spiritual practice, especially corporate worship, while at the same time nurturing that identity as a faith community that was attractive to begin with.

Faith Commitments

Our *Discipline* makes it pretty easy to pick out the distinctive faith commitments of the yearly meeting, because they are stated explicitly. The yearly meeting *Discipline* says we are a yearly meeting set off from others:

*...to maintain the doctrines of the immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit, of the headship of Christ over all things to His Church, and of the waiting worship and inspirational ministry which are, and must ever be, the outgrowth of these doctrines.*⁸

It is helpful to parse that rather compact statement a bit, so as to be able to explore each of those faith commitments in turn.

⁷ Radical Hospitality was the theme of NCYM-C annual sessions in 2012.

⁸ From the *Disciplines*, 1908, 1950, and 1983.

The immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit...

A gathering of yearly meeting members at Virginia Beach Meeting in 2006 asked themselves, “What is the essential distinctive of this yearly meeting?” The gathering began by naming all the possible essential descriptors of the yearly meeting anyone could suggest, and covered the walls with newsprint listing each suggestion. Slowly that long list was whittled down as different suggestions were eliminated as not really essential to the identity of our yearly meeting. The immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit was the one essential all Friends present agreed upon. We could not be Conservative Friends in North Carolina without the immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit.

What that guidance means in the experience of this yearly meeting is that every person who is willing to listen can receive Divine Guidance directly, without any intermediary person or document. That guidance is perceptible and specific: it is not merely advice to “follow this principle in making decisions” but an inward feeling to “take this specific action now.” That experience of connection to the Divine, the transcendent, by whatever name it is called, is central to who we are. Without it we would be somebody else.

The headship of Christ over all things to His Church, ...

Given the particular context of the 1903 separation, this is a statement about what is *not* the primary authority among us. This statement says that our primary authority is not the Bible or Fox’s *Journal* or the *Richmond Declaration of Faith* or the yearly meeting

Discipline or even the yearly meeting itself. The Inward Teacher, the Spirit of Christ, the guidance of God, the Source of the immediate and perceptible guidance spoken of above -- that is our head and our primary authority. Specific vocabulary is not the point here. Remember that George Fox used over 200 terms to refer to Christ in his *Journal*, including Inward Teacher, Physician, Comforter, Guide, and many more. Like Fox, we should be comfortable using many different words to signify this experience of the Divine. This is not a dogmatic, theological statement -- it is an experiential statement: we have experienced the Divine directly, and it is to that Divine that we give our primary allegiance, not anyone or anything else. "Christ" here is a pointer toward that aspect of God which is always available to guide us.

It is the headship of the *church* that is the concern, not the individual. We hear and receive as a gathered people -- a Church, not merely as an individual. Part of our identity, illuminated here, is that we are searching how to be a gathered people of faith, working and living in community. God has desires for how we live and act *together*, exemplifying the kingdom of God and acting to bring that kingdom into its fullness.

The waiting worship and inspirational ministry which are, and must ever be, the outgrowth of these doctrines.

The Discipline speaks of two necessary outgrowths of the perceptible guidance and primacy of God as our authority: waiting worship and inspirational ministry. If in fact everyone has access to the immediate, perceptible guidance of the Divine, as we assert, and the Source of that guidance is our authority, as we also assert, then our worship must be the expectant waiting for that guidance to be

received. We don't want to do anything to interfere or get in the way of hearing what that divine guidance has to say to us. This commitment expresses a genuine skepticism that planned group activity can consistently or reliably meet the true spiritual needs of a group of worshippers. It also expresses a desire to avoid engaging in any unauthentic worship activity. Rather than be false to ourselves, we would prefer to sit still and wait for guidance to be given, when and however God desires.

Inspirational ministry waits for the breathing in of the Divine Spirit, limiting outward or vocal ministry to occasions when it is a genuine response to the immediate and authentic movement of God's Spirit. This is a commitment against prepared sermons, and against the hireling ministry and paid pastorate which seem to be required once prepared sermons become desirable. There is no condemnation of the intentions or motives of those who serve in the paid pastorate, but a recognition that the system in which they labor is ultimately unworkable.

Family Ties and Procedural Distinctives

Two other characteristics mark this yearly meeting. First, the yearly meeting has been profoundly shaped by a few prominent families in each monthly meeting. This phenomenon lasted from the very beginning of the Conservative yearly meeting for about 75 years. The simple statistics are clear. In West Grove Monthly Meeting, 32 of the 37 founding members were Newlins. In Oak Grove meeting, the founders were nearly all Hollowells. In Piney Woods meeting, 19 of the first 28 members were Chappells. Rich Square Monthly Meeting, a larger group, had three prominent families: Parkers, Outlands, and Browns. Leadership positions were

overwhelmingly filled by members of these families for decades, prompting one new member to complain, in the 1980s, that “You can’t be a clerk in this yearly meeting unless you are named Newlin, Parker or Brown!”⁹

There are also some procedural distinctives which set our yearly meeting apart from others. Our yearly meeting is an entity with its own story, compatible with but not identical to the story of its member meetings. Our yearly meeting is not primarily an actor in its own right, but an enabler and facilitator for actions to be carried out by the monthly meetings. Our monthly meetings have greater autonomy than in most yearly meetings. This autonomy I trace back to the matter of the headship of Christ: that is our primary authority, not the authority of the yearly meeting. As a consequence our monthly meetings own their own property and endowments, do their own discernment around the recognition of spiritual gifts, and are responsible for their own discernment of Truth. We don’t discern Truth at the yearly meeting level and then inform the monthly meetings, but instead expect each monthly meeting to be doing its own discernment.

For example, Conservative Friends in North Carolina have been very active in the past couple of decades in Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC). This general support for FWCC was not always the case. At the time FWCC was being formed, one of our monthly meetings wrote and published a declaration against cooperation with FWCC on the grounds that only Conservative Friends were true Christians, and true Christians were not supposed to mix with non-Christians. They had the freedom to reach that discernment; and the yearly meeting’s response was that while

⁹ Attributed to John Hunter of Durham Meeting in the 1980s.

some Friends clearly did not want to participate in FWCC activities, there were Friends in other monthly meetings that did, and those Friends should feel free to do so. The yearly meeting would cooperate to the extent of seeing that those Friends had the necessary yearly meeting credentials to be recognized by FWCC.

Over the past 40-odd years, our individual monthly meetings have in their own time, pace and manner grappled with issues of gender equality and sexual orientation, from who can be a member to same-sex marriage. In each case, the monthly meeting involved was free to come to its own discernment. Although the discernment of other Friends in the yearly meeting was often a resource, there was no attempt to reach and/or impose a top-down decision on what was correct for Friends. As a result, the yearly meeting has reached a unity around these issues that affirms all persons, without much of the conflict and painful confrontations that have afflicted some other Quaker groups.

Lloyd Lee Wilson is a member of Friendship Monthly Meeting, Greensboro, North Carolina.

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Personal Experiences and Observations of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative)

Carole Edgerton Treadway

Recently a Friend from another yearly meeting asked me about North Carolina Yearly Meeting's process of discernment, especially around taking a public stand on an issue of concern, such as opposition to the death penalty. Our conversation was not long, and didn't offer time to go into the question in depth, so I tried to describe what our Yearly Meeting is at its best. I told him that the most important part of the process is to ground the issue under consideration in open, silent, expectant waiting, allowing it to be carried out in the spirit of Christ. The pace would be slow and deliberate. Everyone would be free to speak as led and no one person would be allowed to dominate the proceedings. If the clerk sensed that we were becoming uncentered, we would return to the silence for a time. It would be more important for the issue to be considered in right order than for there to be a decision. We would be willing to set the issue aside for a time of seasoning.

The Friend thanked me and said it was just what he wanted to hear. The conversation stimulated me to think more about our yearly meeting and how it is distinctive as a Conservative yearly meeting. My perspective is that of both an outsider and an insider.

I did not grow up in North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), but rather in Ohio Yearly Meeting, also a conservative yearly meeting, because my parents moved to Ohio from North Carolina the year before I was born. They moved at the tail end of the Depression because there was an opportunity for work. They moved to the part of Ohio where my father was born and lived until he was eight years old. My parents grew up within North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), my grandparents were actively involved in it, and my great grandparents were part of the body that established it in 1904. My great-great grandparents were among those who formed Cedar Grove Preparative Meeting of Rich Square Monthly Meeting in Woodland. Thus, I have strong historical ties to the yearly meeting. My family and I came to North Carolina for short visits as often as we could because both of my grandmothers still lived in North Carolina, along with other relatives. In the summer of my ninth year, I spent the entire summer with my grandmothers, who lived only a mile apart. They took me with them to the annual sessions of the yearly meeting.

My memories of that visit to the annual sessions are spotty. The yearly meeting met in those days in Cedar Grove Meetinghouse in Woodland, which was the spiritual and social center of the yearly meeting. Folks from out of the area were housed with local Friends. I remember sharing a room with three or four other women, all elderly, and sharing a bed with one of my grandmothers. I do not

remember any other children and I was not required to attend the business sessions, so I spent a lot of time entertaining myself.

On First Days, I attended my grandmothers' meeting, Holly Spring Meeting, informally known as Friendsville Meeting. Friendsville was in a small rural community in Randolph County where there were Friends who had separated from the older meeting of the same name around 1912. Soon Friends in the yearly meeting felt a concern to establish a school for their children where they could receive a "guarded" education -- that is, one where Friends' faith and practice could be instilled in the children and where they could be sheltered from the unwanted influences they would encounter in the public schools. Friendsville seemed to be the right place. A meetinghouse was built in 1925, with half being used as a meeting room and half as a school room. At that time a few Friends' families from other regions moved to Friendsville to be part of what became a community established, at least informally, with the intention of witnessing to the outward and inward distinctive qualities of Conservative Friends. Among these newcomers were my maternal grandparents from Woodland, and my paternal grandparents who moved from Ohio. The school flourished for a few years, with students coming both from the neighborhood and from farther away. The latter boarded with local families. By the time I came along, the school was no longer held, but the meeting still had faithful attenders and some lively ministry. Older Friends still dressed "plain" and spoke the plain language.

In my Conservative meeting in Ohio, I attended meeting for worship from the time I was an infant and was sitting through it from at least age three. Little was taught about Quakerism in First Day school but we were told Bible stories and the Bible was read each evening in my family as well as most others. My father once said,

probably in response to some question of mine, "We don't go to meeting to be entertained." I suppose the expectation that we learn by doing and watching was true in North Carolina Yearly Meeting as well. I learned about Quakerism formally in the Quaker boarding school under the care of Ohio Yearly Meeting and at Earlham College where I also attended meeting for worship regularly.

I did not attend yearly meeting as an adult until the mid-1970s, a few years after my husband, our two children, and I moved to Greensboro where we found a thriving Quaker community. The first yearly meeting sessions I attended felt like home. I had not attended a Conservative meeting since graduating from college. Before our move to Greensboro in 1968, we attended a meeting in a university town where there was great concern for the critical issues of the Vietnam War and civil rights. I loved the people in the meeting and shared their concerns, but I was missing the deeply gathered silence and the ministry that came from it that was familiar to me both in my home meeting in Ohio and in the little meeting in North Carolina. Friends welcomed me as if I belonged there, perhaps because they remembered my grandmothers (my grandfathers both died fairly young), but that was not all of it. My husband also felt the warm welcome and acceptance that I did.

The yearly meeting at that time was still very much a family affair of kinfolk and lifelong friends. Browns and Parkers filled the benches in Cedar Grove Meeting, while Newlins made up most of the membership in West Grove Meeting. Durham and Virginia Beach Meetings had brought new blood into the yearly meeting in the 1950s. Holly Spring (Friendsville) Meeting was very small by this time and was laid down in the early 1980s.

It was here in this yearly meeting that I experienced again the deep silence and ministry that was less about the concerns of the day and more about a loving Heavenly Father (a term not so much heard these days), and the living water of the Spirit. The ministers conveyed to me that we can have an intimate, personal connection with God that comes from unconditional love. Whereas many unprogrammed meetings were struggling to find language more meaningful to them than traditional Christian language, ministry in these meetings embraced the living Christ and kept the Bible stories alive, freshly applied to modern-day challenges.

In Conservative meetings, I found no less commitment to the concerns for peace and justice than in other meetings I had attended. In my childhood experience of North Carolina and Ohio Yearly Meeting Friends, these concerns were less obvious sometimes, overshadowed with the concern for the spiritual well-being of Friends and with maintaining the outward distinctives of plain dress and speech and for a way of life separated from the influences of the contemporary culture. For Friends who chose to follow the tradition of plain dress and speech, the choice was a witness to the world, and was emblematic of an inward surrender to the transforming work of the spirit of Christ within them. As I learned the stories of the people of the yearly meeting in the late twentieth century, I realized that being a Conservative Friend did not mean being separated from the world, even as the concern for refraining from the demoralizing and distracting aspects of our culture was still strong. Their lives were “patterns and examples” of living under Divine guidance and in the spirit of Christ in whatever direction that might take.

In the more than forty years that I have been part of this yearly meeting I have been moved by the loving acceptance visitors find here. I have been grateful to find a spiritual community that is cohesive, bound together by the common desire to live in love, and open to the different ways the monthly meetings have responded to the challenges of our Advices and Queries. I continue to find deeply centered worship. I value especially that, when differences arise, there is a willingness to listen to one another and to set aside matters on which there is not unity for a later time when there may be more light or the time may be right. Of course, there are tensions at times. I have witnessed some of them and stories from my family reveal that on occasion these have been serious and threatening to the unity of the yearly meeting. Yet, we persist in seeking “unity in the bond of peace.”

Carole Treadway is a member of Friendship Monthly Meeting, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Faith, Love and Trust: Maintaining Unity in the Face of Evolving Concepts of Marriage and Sexuality

By Gwen Gosney Erickson

I was first approached about writing this piece during our 2015 yearly meeting sessions. I have seen a steady stream of announcements of brokenness from other yearly meetings during the few weeks since. West Hills Friends was “released” from Northwest Yearly Meeting (NWYM),¹⁰ North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Friends United Meeting) (NCYM-FUM) is in a state of turmoil and possible division, and Quaker-related social media is full of posts questioning yearly meeting levels of authority, correct (or incorrect) process, and our need to love one another in these times

¹⁰ The Seventh Month statement from the Northwest Yearly Meeting Board of Elders states: Recognizing that our yearly meeting is unable to embrace our current diversity, and recognizing the shattering that is ensuing, with grace and charity we sorrowfully release West Hill Friends Church from NWYM membership. . . . We record our respect for the process WHFC has followed and the sincerity of their convictions, which include their affirmation of committed same sex relationships and the decision to perform those weddings. [<http://afriendlyletter.com/breaking-pro-gay-oregon-meeting-expelled-by-northwest-ym/>, posted and accessed July 25, 2015]

of disunity. Beyond the Quaker sphere, the wider society is experiencing intense culture wars. Friends are just one of many Christian denominations clarifying, restating, or expanding their practices and core beliefs surrounding homosexuality and definitions of marriage.

I watch so many others struggle and pause to reflect on how things might be different. Some of the very debates tearing apart communities in 2015 were quietly and lovingly resolved twenty years earlier by my own yearly meeting. I do not think I fully realized the significance at the time but it stayed with me. Those who were active in the mid-1990s, and others who have joined since, regularly point to our yearly meeting's handling of marriage equality and how we arrived there. For many, it offers a shorthand way to explain the very nature of our yearly meeting.

When encountering a name like North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), the uninitiated pause at the word "Conservative." Our very name provides an opportunity for dialog. The name does not seem to match the bumper stickers typically found in our meeting parking lots on First Day morning. "Wait - *You* are part of a conservative group?" is a common comment from colleagues envisioning stereotypes of right-wing politicians and fundamentalist Christians. My quick answer explains that we are conservative in our worship practices and grounding in God but not necessarily in our social or political viewpoints and practices. Depending on the questioner's interest and background, I might go on to briefly explain the diversity of Friends (and if in my office, pull out Geoffrey Kaiser's illustrative chart of Quaker schisms).¹¹ A useful example for explaining just how diverse Friends can be -- and how

¹¹ See <http://quakertheology.org/QT-22-Kaiser-History-Chart.html> for fuller information about the chart and how it has evolved.

my yearly meeting brings together terms, concepts, and beliefs that might seem oppositional in some circles -- is its experience with issues of marriage equality.¹² Yes, we say we are “conservative,” but we largely settled this marriage equality business as a yearly meeting twenty years ago.

Depending upon association or background, people have a variety of preconceived notions about the Society of Friends (Quakers). We are a confusing bunch with a wide variety of beliefs and practices. Those of us living in the Triad area of North Carolina are especially blessed with opportunities to engage with the full spectrum of our Quaker family if we so desire. Most of the people I encounter associate Quakers with social justice – praising Friends as leaders in nineteenth century reform movements such as women’s rights and the abolition of slavery. They often assume that Friends are among the vanguard of the marriage equality movement. In our own quiet way, some of the meetings associated with NCYM-C were. At the same time, some meetings affiliated with NCYM-FUM also advocated for their non-heterosexual members to receive equal treatment, such as opportunities for leadership roles and the possibility of marriage. However, these issues were by no means settled and a very deep divide remains within NCYM-FUM. Also in our North Carolina Quaker landscape are meetings affiliated with Evangelical Friends International (typically explicitly defining marriage as between one man and one woman) and Friends General Conference (generally supporting equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer Friends).

¹² My use of the term “marriage equality” rather than “same sex marriage” is intentional. “Same sex marriage” implies multiple categories of marriage, i.e. normalizing heterosexual couples and defining non-heterosexual relationships in opposition, rather than intentionally expanding the concept of marriage equally to all couples.

I am not writing this to be a treatise advocating for marriage equality or to hold up our yearly meeting (or more accurate, monthly meetings within our yearly meeting) as a leader in that effort. How our yearly meeting arrived at the point we are at on the issue in 2015 and the process we went through two decades earlier is more important than whether or not our yearly meeting supports marriage equality. It is not the specific issue that distinguishes us as a body. It is the process that we went through as a yearly meeting, the way we conduct our business, and how we grow in faith and love that binds us together as NCYM-C.

Love in Action: Discerning Together

It is fascinating to go back and review what was going on twenty years ago. Enough time has passed that there is a sense of history but it is still near enough that many of us remain active in the yearly meeting. As a historian, I think it is important to set the contexts for both then and now. This is a multilayered story: the facts of how NCYM-C has responded to the evolving acceptance of homosexuality and marriage equality in our society, what these facts might showcase about the nature of our yearly meeting, and our own cultural memory and construction of our identity through a defining moment in the 1994 yearly meeting sessions.

The State of Society reports from our monthly meetings described a group of vibrant meeting communities, growing in membership, financial strength, and spiritual depth. Several meetings have been addressing difficult issues which have required all the patience, persistence, and love for one another that Friends could muster. By taking as much time as necessary to understand one another and to build the unity that comes

only from nurturing the Spirit in one another, Friends in Durham have been able to unite in a decision to receive applications for marriage by same-sex couples in the same matter as applications from heterosexual couples. Some Friends present expressed their disunity with this decision, although there was general support for the process followed by Durham Monthly Meeting. Virginia Beach and Friendship monthly meetings reported that they have engaged the same issue, though without yet reaching spiritual unity. We are thankful for the spiritual liveliness that leads us to address hard problems, and for the growth in spiritual maturity and mutual love that comes when we are faithful in the effort.¹³

NCYM-C met on the campus of Chowan College in Murfreesboro, N.C. in 1994 for our 297th annual sessions. The yearly meeting had a defined theme, "Love in Action: Caring Concerns."¹⁴ The theme was selected as part of the coordinated planning leading up to the 1997 joint sessions of NCYM-C and NCYM-FUM when North Carolina Friends celebrated a shared history of 300 years as North Carolina Yearly Meeting. The mid-1990s were a fascinating time for the yearly meeting. Meeting jointly with NCYM-FUM in 1997 would provide members of NCYM-C an opportunity to reflect on our differences and what we valued about our own yearly meeting. We were better positioned to do this due to the journey we had made as a yearly meeting leading up to our 300th sessions. Events in 1994 grounded our yearly meeting in love and set us on a course for how

¹³ "Summary of Exercises: North Carolina Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Conservative), Seventh Month 14 - 17, 1994," 1994 Minutes, p. 77.

¹⁴ The exact wording of the theme varies depending upon document consulted: "Caring Concern - Love in Action," "Love in Action: Caring Concerns," "Love and Caring in Action." The theme as stated in the approved epistle is selected for use as that was the statement approved for distribution to the wider world of Friends.

our monthly meetings and yearly meeting relate to one another into the twenty-first century.

The concluding minute of the 1994 sessions quoted from I Corinthians 13: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.” The yearly meeting was at a turning point that could have gone very differently. The concluding minute goes on to say, “The gentle reminders to look for God in each person have contributed to the sense of loving concern for individual Friends and for our monthly meetings.”¹⁵ The question of marriage equality was just one of several major issues coalescing that summer.

Both the yearly meeting and several of the monthly meetings were struggling with divisive issues. The yearly meeting had labored for two years regarding behavior expectations for yearly meeting clerks. “While no one wanted to hold the yearly meeting clerk to a standard of conduct different from that of other Friends, we felt clear that the role of clerk brings with it accountability to a faith community bigger than the monthly meeting.”¹⁶ The yearly meeting attained unity at the 1994 sessions for “how we should choose, support, and nurture our clerk.”¹⁷ Closure was reached on a sensitive episode that had brought tension, strong feelings, and pain to a number of active yearly meeting members. The query answers from monthly meetings showed that, “Love and unity is not always maintained among us: at meetings for business sometimes egos clash with each other instead of laying down to wait for Truth to reveal itself.”¹⁸ The pre-gathering retreat on Fourth Day afternoon, “...considered the diversity of

¹⁵ 1994 Minutes, p. 74.

¹⁶ 1994 Minutes, p. 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ 1994 Minutes, p. 76.

Quakerism and what it is we are saying when we decide to call ourselves Quaker.” The Summary of Exercises concluded that, “Finally we were led to ask whether we are big enough to allow God to do what he wants to do with and through us and not to try to limit him to our preconceptions.”¹⁹ Love in action required faith over fear and a willingness to be open to God’s leadings.

What could have been a long drawn out debate or divisive showdown about same sex marriage was just a blip in the overall 1994 NCYM-C meetings for business. This is because several monthly meetings had previously entered a discernment process regarding marriage procedures and the willingness to consider requests for same-gender marriages. Durham Monthly Meeting was the first to bring the question to the yearly meeting. It is important to note that the question was never one of whether or not the yearly meeting, as a whole, was willing to consider marriage of same-gender couples. The issue was whether the yearly meeting accepted that one of the monthly meetings was willing to consider requests for marriages from any individuals active in the meeting, whether same- or opposite gender couples. Membership matters, such as marriages, are considered the purview of the monthly meeting. The question, then, was whether the yearly meeting would take issue with Durham’s decision.

Durham had begun reporting to yearly meeting on its process of considering same sex marriage in 1991.

Examining our beliefs concerning marriage under the care of the meeting has been a vital concern this year. We had a series of forums on sexuality, homosexuality, and same sex marriages. There was much support for considering same sex marriages, though we have not reached consensus on this matter yet. A

¹⁹ 1994 Minutes, p. 74.

request from a beloved member for marriage under the care of the meeting to a nonattender led to a great deal of searching on the nature of our expectations for clearness committees on marriage and the meaning of marriage in the manner of Friends. This was a difficult experience, and we are still in the process of healing wounds that it precipitated.²⁰

Founded in 1937, Durham Monthly Meeting joined NCYM-C in 1955 and is an example of the newer meetings established in more urban areas during the mid-twentieth century. In addition to their formal yearly meeting affiliation with NCYM-C, Durham is also affiliated with Friends General Conference (FGC) through their association with Piedmont Friends Fellowship (PFF). Durham's membership includes a large number of families and individuals from a variety of life experiences and backgrounds, including gay and lesbian Friends. While a direct request had not yet come from a same gender couple for marriage under the care of the meeting, active participation of gay and lesbian Friends in the monthly meeting meant that discussion of same gender marriage was not merely an intellectual conversation. There were potentially life-

²⁰ 1991 Minutes, p. 74-75. For clarification, the request for marriage under the care of the meeting was from an opposite gender couple. Therefore, the immediate issue was regarding the role of the clearness committee and meaning of marriage and not same gender marriage specifically. Consideration of marriage then broadened to include more than just the questions raised by the specific request. For the purposes of this essay, all quotes, unless noted otherwise, are from documents presented to the yearly meeting and included in the NCYM-C published minutes. It is recognized that additional documentation and details may be gained from monthly meeting records and personal writings of those more directly involved in this discernment process. However, I decided to focus on the yearly meeting experience, especially since I was not personally active at the time in a monthly meeting considering same gender marriage.

changing implications for members of the monthly meeting community.

Durham's process of examining marriage, which began in earnest in 1990-1991, continued into a second year. In 1992, Durham Friends shared the process with the yearly meeting through their State of Society report:

We are exploring many questions: What is marriage? What are the ways that a meeting can be involved in a couple's marriage? What is the couple's responsibility to the meeting? What is the meeting's responsibility to the couple? Should the meeting affirm same gender marriages? Questions regarding marriage and sexuality touch each of us at a deeply personal level. We feel that all of these questions require thoughtful and tender consideration, but the issue of same sex marriage is one that requires special sensitivity because we have a number of gay and lesbian members and attenders whose presence we cherish and for whom these discussions are especially challenging. We hope that God will give us the strength and courage to continue to labor together on this matter in a loving and respectful way. A special committee has been formed to ensure that the consideration of these questions proceeds in the Light.²¹

Durham was not alone in their process of considering the possibility of same gender marriage. Friendship Monthly Meeting's 1992 State of Society report noted that they, too, were beginning to explore the question of same gender marriage:

The issue of same-sex union has come up in our meeting – in the abstract. Our Peace and Social Concerns Committee and the Ministry and Worship Committee have met together to discuss this issue, having gathered together various articles and study materials. One of their meetings was opened to the meeting as

²¹ 1992 Minutes, p. 59.

a whole. Present at this meeting were two Friends from the Chapel Hill Meeting who shared with us the process they had carried out in their meeting in response to a request from a same-sex couple for a covenant celebration. We were impressed with the tender loving care expressed and the striving to follow Quaker process that they described. Such issues are hard to deal with in the abstract but we feel it is important to maintain an informed awareness so that we may be ready to act faithfully should the issue become concrete for us.²²

Like Durham, Friendship is located in a more urban area and includes formal affiliation with NCYM-C and also affiliation with FGC through PFF. Friendship Monthly Meeting began in 1968 and joined NCYM-C in 1980. Monthly meeting membership includes Friends with long family ties to the Conservative Friends (not only NCYM-C, but also Iowa and Ohio yearly meetings) as well as those from FGC meetings outside of North Carolina and other faith traditions.

One distinctive of NCYM-C is the central role that queries play in the life of our monthly meetings and directly in our meetings for business. Each monthly meeting is expected to answer each of the twelve queries over the course of the year and these responses are read before the face of the meeting during yearly meeting sessions. The 1992 Summary of Exercises noted:

The answers were often more lengthy and appeared more fully considered than in past times. The use of the Queries as a means for deep reflection upon our beliefs and practices is evident. We are experiencing change and growth, and we are learning, with God's grace, more openly and honestly to share with each other.²³

²² 1992 Minutes, p. 61-62.

²³ 1992 Minutes, p. 69.

The Summary of Exercises also reflected that upon hearing the State of Society reports, “We were moved by the way in which our meetings are struggling to come together in the face of change and challenges.”²⁴

The 1993 yearly meeting sessions again brought opportunity for Durham Monthly Meeting to share their journey with the full yearly meeting. Durham’s State of Society report was fairly lengthy and about one third of it was devoted to the meeting’s continuing process to answer questions about the meaning of and procedures for marriage under the care of Durham. While there were a number of questions noted, attention focused on the possibility of same-gender marriage and whether marriage under the care of the meeting required formal monthly meeting membership. Durham reported that:

*These are challenging matters for us, and we have given them much prayerful consideration. The end is not yet clear to us. As we have worked together, we have tried to treat each other with tenderness and respect, and we hope we have succeeded. Worship sharing has proved very helpful, and we recognize that our searching has contributed to our deepening bonds with each other. We have appreciated the recent Pendle Hill pamphlet, *Beyond Consensus*, which urges each of us to remain involved in the process, open to the light in each other, and earnest in our endeavor to allow God to have a voice as we work toward a sense of the meeting. We strive to wait patiently together as we pray for God’s guidance in these and all matters, and we rejoice together in our continuing experience of God’s love.*²⁵

²⁴ 1992 Minutes, p. 71.

²⁵ 1993 Minutes, p. 66-67.

By the time Durham Monthly Meeting presented their State of Society report at the 1994 yearly meeting sessions, Friends were well aware of the lengthy process that Durham had undergone over the previous three years.

For many years we have prayerfully sought clearness about how to articulate our procedures for marriage in the meeting, especially regarding issues of membership and same-gender relationships. In Tenth Month 1993 we approved a minute indicating that Durham Friends Meeting would receive a request for marriage from a couple in a same-gender relationship in the same manner in which we receive a request from a man and a woman, devoting worshipful and loving attention to the process by which the meeting and the couple reach clearness about the proposed union. . . We feel great tenderness toward others in the yearly meeting who labor with this issue, and we welcome your questions and concerns as we endeavor to discern what God intends for us as individual meetings and as a whole.²⁶

Minute on Marriage
Approved by Durham Friends Meeting, Tenth Month
1993

The strength of our spiritual community at Durham Monthly Meeting comes from our devotion to God and our belief in the continuing revelation of Truth. Each of us brings distinctive experiences to this process of discernment. This spiritual mission makes outward differences insignificant. Our understanding of the Truth as it has been revealed to us through much patient waiting, leads us to affirm all members of our community and their spirit-led lives. We recognize and

²⁶ 1994 Minutes, p. 88.

appreciate diversity and welcome into meeting all who aspire towards our goal. We hope that all active participants in the life of the meeting will consider membership, if so led.

Our understanding of the Truth further directs us to confirm the Light in all spiritual, emotional, and physical relationships between individuals which are characterized by love, support, growth, and sincerity and in which faith, hope, and truth abide. We understand that these relationships occur between individuals of the same and of opposite genders and that those involved may wish to formally celebrate their relationship with marriage. Durham Monthly Meeting is ready to consider a request for marriage under its care from any individuals involved in the life of the meeting, following the procedures described in our marriage document.

Through our procedures, we strive to cultivate a caring and thoughtful clearness process for all such celebrations. It is the sense of the meeting that we move forward with this decision while recognizing that not all of us are comfortable with same gender marriage or the use of the word marriage to describe such a union. We also reaffirm our responsibility to provide continuing nurture to all relationships under the care of the meeting.²⁷

Friendship Monthly Meeting had not directly reported on the issue since their 1992 State of Society report but they had continued to consider the question. Virginia Beach Monthly Meeting reported, in response to Durham's State of Society report, that they also had considered the issue of same gender marriage but without yet reaching unity. Other monthly meetings had observed Durham's journey but not taken up the matter for their own meetings.

²⁷ 1994 Minutes, p. 90-91.

Fayetteville and Friendship monthly meetings shared in their 1995 State of Society reports that they, too, now had minutes addressing the question of same gender marriage. Fayetteville stated that they had “recorded the minute, as the Light led us to share in the love we have for all children of God.”

The Fayetteville Friends Meeting recognizes that importance of committed, loving relationships that endure, are unselfish, and provide mutual support and tenderness. Our belief in the Quaker principle of the universality of love requires us to affirm the belief that a deeply enriching and spiritually fulfilling relationship between two individuals is not limited to those of the opposite sex. . . . Recognizing the diversity of meaning of terms like “marriage” and “ceremony of commitment” the meeting respects the right of the couple to name their own relationship.²⁸

While Friendship had begun their discernment process earlier than Fayetteville, their process was not as smooth. It was noted in their State of Society report that one member withdrew her membership as a result of the decision to support same-gender unions and some others ceased to attend. The meeting prayed “that they and we will be led to reunion in peace in the bonds of love.” At 1995 annual sessions, Friendship was open about their uneven process and placed their journey within the context of their community’s longer history.

Perhaps more time should have been taken, more consideration taken of the views of those of us who did not participate. In any case, it was felt that the approved minute marked a place on the way where we can stand for a time, and that will provide us

²⁸ 1995 Minutes, p. 76.

a basis for proceeding. We believe that this is a step to be taken in the measure of the Light of Christ that we have in the expectation that more will thus be given and that the Light may show us unexpected vistas in time to come. The minute approved in 1975 by this meeting in which persons of any sexual orientation were welcomed to participate fully in Friendship Meeting laid the groundwork for the minute approved in 1994, though no one would have dreamed 20 years ago just what the appearance of the structure build on that foundation would turn out to be.²⁹

NCYM-C had weathered the debate over same-gender marriage intact. Several meetings had formal minutes recognizing same gender relationships but none presumed to guide other meetings within the yearly meeting. Others did not discuss the issue in their own meetings or feel led to consider it themselves, but they did not prohibit those that were so led. The focus was always on discerning God's will within each monthly meeting. Meeting decisions were grounded in Quaker process, guided by love for their members, and informed by their discernment of Christ's teachings. They did not focus on civil legislation or viewpoints of other denominations. Each followed what they felt was right in their particular time and place. Twenty years earlier, Friendship Friends had approved a minute welcoming members regardless of sexual orientation. Twenty years later, the U.S. Supreme Court recognized the right for same-gender couples to marry, allowing marriage under the care of a Friends meeting to finally have the same legal status as the marriages of heterosexual couples.

²⁹ 1995 Minutes, p. 80.

A Defining Story

A number of us have been telling this story for two decades now. While the core sentiment is consistent, it is a story that varies somewhat in retelling. Several Friends nervously asked me how I was going to resolve these seemingly conflicting memories. What I have written and reproduced thus far comes directly from the published minutes and reports as presented during yearly meeting sessions at the time. None of those facts are contested. What is interesting is how differently some Friends remember the moment when Durham presented their State of Society report, including their Minute on Marriage, at the 1994 yearly meeting sessions. A detailed transcript is not available. All that the minutes say on the matter has been excerpted above. However, there is more to the story.

I personally missed the reading of the State of Society reports as I did not arrive at the 1994 yearly meeting sessions until later that day. However, I spoke with several people who were there. Their narratives all fully agree that Durham Monthly Meeting presented their Minute on Marriage as a part of the State of Society reports during meeting for business on Seventh Day morning. All recall that there was a negative reaction from some visiting members of Ohio Yearly Meeting. The reaction of NCYM-C members was much more nuanced. A well-respected elder member expressed that while not personally at the place where Durham had arrived, he recognized that Durham Friends followed a prayerful discernment process. Deborah Shaw stepped out at the crucial moment when Durham presented their minute but she meticulously kept a journal while attending the 1994 yearly meeting sessions. Her documentation does not answer all the details but does provide an eloquent summation of the reactions:

... missed ... Durham's State of the Society – which must have included a same sex minute. Now am hearing much reaction, mostly from visitors, mostly negative. The members of NCYM-C apparently were in favor and felt that things were done in the Spirit. And those not in unity supported the Light that shines on Durham's path – respects their search.³⁰

So what remains for differing interpretations? NCYM-FUM member Max Carter, who was attending NCYM-C sessions to lead our Bible study in 1994, recalls George Parker stating, “this isn't where I am or where our meeting is but we trust your process.” He further recalls visiting Ohio Yearly Meeting members opposed to the minute leaving at that point before the conclusion of the business session. Others have heard the same story but with other respected Friends being the one to speak. While most Friends I have spoken with name George Parker, I have also heard the names Louise Wilson and David Brown. From my conversations with multiple people who were there, I believe I can assert that the respected Friend who spoke was George Parker.

However, it is interesting to hear what other names are mentioned. My interpretation is that this provides some important information about our yearly meeting and its cultural memory. The pattern I have noticed is that Friends name an individual they know and respect and who has long personal and family ties to NCYM-C. George Parker, Louise Wilson, and David Brown all grew up in the yearly meeting as members of Rich Square Monthly Meeting. Unlike Durham Meeting, Rich Square is a historic rural meeting dating back to 1760 and was a leader in the gathering of NCYM-C as a separate yearly meeting in 1904. While George Parker remained a member of Rich Square his entire life, Louise Wilson left to found Virginia Beach

³⁰ Personal journal of Deborah Shaw, 7/16/1994.

Monthly Meeting and David Brown is an active member of Friendship Monthly Meeting. My suspicion is that George's statement was unconsciously reassigned over time to create more meaningful connections. Everyone I have spoken with who personally knew George remembers him as the speaker. Those who were less familiar with George, usually members of Durham Meeting, recall Louise. I noted that Louise Wilson shared her spiritual journey with Durham Friends at their well-attended meeting retreat in January 1992, and so would have been known and respected. David Brown, brother of Louise Wilson, also would have been better known than George in Durham, Friendship, and Virginia Beach Meetings, and perhaps others. My assertion is that it does not matter who spoke but that the person who spoke was a respected older member who connected our yearly meeting to our Conservative roots. The key is that our yearly meeting may not have had uniformity on how to address same-gender marriage, but we did have unity in loving and trusting each other through a discernment process. Such love and trust crossed potential divides, such as rural versus urban meetings, established Conservative meetings versus dually affiliated newer meetings, and individuals from differing generations.

The Faith and Practice of NCYM-C (1983 edition) presents "Friends Understanding of Marriage" as follows:

We counsel all family members to seek to live in such a spirit of openness and humility among themselves that barriers may not arise to good communication and to growth in love.

Great care needs to be exercised that the union be established and continued on the foundation of true love and respect. Even when the marriage relationship may fail to achieve its highest

possibilities and unhappiness develops, we believe that by patient and prayerful determination, these obstacles in many cases can be overcome.³¹

This same care, patience, and prayerful determination guides the monthly meetings of NCYM-C in their relations with one another. Our monthly meetings are different but we are tied together through our common affiliation with NCYM-C. Our differences contribute to the whole and our commitment to love one another and prayerfully discern God's will brings us together.

Gwen Gosney Erickson has attended NCYM-C yearly meetings sessions since 1981. She formally joined Friends as a member of Rich Square Monthly Meeting in Woodland, N.C. and is now a member of Friendship Monthly Meeting in Greensboro, N.C., where she serves as Librarian and Archivist for the Friends Historical Collection at Guilford College.

³¹ NCYM-C Faith and Practice, p. 29.

Bearing One With Another

by Deborah Shaw

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.

Isaac Penington (1667)

Whenever someone asks me about my yearly meeting, I nearly always respond by telling two narratives. One of the narratives – about how North Carolina Yearly Meeting - Conservative (NCYM-C) dealt with monthly meetings who endorsed same-sex marriage -- is described in detail elsewhere in this issue. The second narrative is one that is much more personal to me and to my husband, Sidney Lee Kitchens, who is a primary figure in the tale. It is about how we made our true condition known to our faith community, and how it embraced us tenderly during difficult times. (It is interesting to note that both these instances took place in the same year and at the same yearly meeting sessions.)

Early in 1994, through a series of events familiar to someone in the grip of the disease of addiction, Sid was arrested on drug-related charges. Later that year, he was sentenced to serve four and a half years in jail. At Sid's sentencing, there were thirty people in the courtroom on his behalf: members of Friendship Monthly Meeting, of New Garden Monthly Meeting, and of our international folk dance community. The sentence was delivered shortly before NCYM-C yearly meeting sessions.

At that point Sid had been in recovery for a little over five months and was very involved in the twelve-step program. As we made preparations for him to be turned in to serve his time, I asked him to write a letter which he would send to the clerks of the monthly meetings and to the yearly meeting clerk. We were very involved in the yearly meeting and I wanted Sid to communicate with our faith community in a wholesale way so that all would be aware of what was going on, and so that I wouldn't have to tell the story multiple times when I attended the upcoming yearly meeting sessions. Sid was agreeable to this request and excerpts of the letter he sent to the yearly meeting clerk and the clerks of our monthly meetings follow:

Dear Friends,

Don't really know how to begin this sad communication, but here goes. Unbeknownst to most of you and denied by myself for years I have suffered from the disease of addiction. From the time I first got drunk at 16 and then moved on to psychedelics, ups and downs, cocaine and pot at 17 and was forced leave my home I've been an addict. From the time I met Deborah I gave up the chemical portion of my addiction but never completely gave up

alcohol and pot. Because I never got drunk as I used to and because I smoked very little in comparison to what I used to I considered that I had control. I denied to myself that I was an addict; in fact I never considered it. Pot is an herb and organic was part of my justification. But the fact is that still periodically I would go on binges. I still managed to run my business (in a slipshod fashion), went to meeting regular, became involved and truly believe that I was becoming a better person. Must have been learning something because began to feel guilty about my using and began to more and more have a desire to quit. Yet I was always going to do it tomorrow, and we know when that comes.

This last year began using more and more pot daily and even began to drink more regularly also. Although I was praying to quit I didn't seem to have the strength to help God help me. The last few months just gave up and said to myself, this is just the way that I am and my pot using escalated even more. Never let anyone tell you that it is not addictive; I know better. Had an opportunity to transport some pot for some people I knew and receive a large portion for pay. Thought that it was a good idea at the time. In a way I knew what I was risking but could not think clearly, it just looked like a good way to get free pot and despite the risks which I knew too well I became involved in this scheme. Resultantly and naturally I was caught carrying 30 pounds of pot down the road. Deborah, because of being my wife was nearly involved, even though she was innocent of the scheme and didn't want me to smoke and really was only letting me wear my sword as

long as I could in the hopes that someday I would voluntarily take it off.

Well I thank God that I was arrested. Even after that I started to use again while awaiting my court date. It was then that I realized that I couldn't quit and that I was a very sick person. I began to go to Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings. It was through NA that I began to understand that my problem was a disease, progressive, incurable and fatal if not treated. The only treatment that works is complete abstinence from all drugs which includes alcohol. Group support and, for me, daily attendance at NA meetings is also necessary. The therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel. Through NA and the support of friends and especially my beloved Friendship Meeting Friends I have been clean now since January 31 of this year. That is a miracle for me who never truly has had two weeks clean time since I was a teenager. That is wonderful for me and I've been amazed and gratified by the support of everyone who knows. The hard part is that I pled guilty to my crime and received a four year sentence which I began serving June 10. Am now in a state prison but have been assigned to an honor grade camp as soon as there is room for me at one.

Prison is very hard for a sensitive person to bear; it's much worse and more dangerous than the movies because you are really there. It's for real. Drugs, bizarre sex, and violence abound in the system. I am a witness to it.

Hopefully this experience will help me to become a more serious and compassionate human being and with

God's help and Jesus as my friend and guide I will persevere and endure. I'm sorry if this shocks or hurts anyone who thought they knew me pretty well. Most of all though, I've harmed myself.

If anyone would like to write to me I would appreciate it. Mail is truly precious here. I would be happy to answer any questions or comments to the best of my ability. It feels good even though I'm here to have this secret part of my life over. For years it has kept me from being truly free although I have been blessed in many ways. God's rain falls on the just and the unjust. I hope you all will not judge me too harshly or feel betrayed. I certainly never meant to hurt anyone or behave in a hypocritical fashion by being a Quaker. Was doing the best that I could at the time. Addiction is a disease and I had it bad. Now I'm in recovery and for the first time in my life there are no secrets about me and I'm humbly grateful it came even if it seems late to me.

This letter has gone on long enough (I've plenty of time to write more) so will close by saying that I love each of you very much. My capacity to love and have compassionate feeling seems to have increased with time away from the dope. Let anyone who thinks they can experiment with drugs beware, I never started out to be an addict.

With love and respect for all, and all those principles that Friends have taught me that I feel are finally bearing some fruit.

Sid Kitchens

George Stabler was the clerk of NCYM-C then, and out of the opening worship for the first session he read from 2 Corinthians and shared the following query: *If we see Jesus' face, how will the next person look?* He went on to mention Sid's situation and opened the worship for Friends to speak to it. Much powerful sharing, and sweet, followed this. What follows is the minute recorded for this:

Sid, a member of our yearly meeting, is in prison for unlawful actions caused by drug addiction. He is repentant for his actions and seeking recovery through Narcotics Anonymous. He has expressed an appreciation for letters of support from Friends. Friends were urged to visit and write Sid and to consider visiting other prison inmates. Friends expressed their love and caring for Sid. Deborah Shaw, Sid's wife, shared the importance of the love and caring of Friends for both her and Sid. We were reminded that letters to the parole board will be helpful.³²

Throughout yearly meeting sessions, I felt very upheld and cared for. I know that Sid felt this prayer cover as well. This sense did not stop after the sessions. Sid received dozens of letters from yearly meeting Friends while he was in prison for the nearly four months that he served. Inmates and guards called him the "mailman" at one of the facilities as they were astounded by the amount of mail he received and sent. Friends from various meetings visited Sid, especially Wilmington Friends, as Sid's longest stay was in a facility near Wilmington. Friends checked in with me, asking me what they could do to support and care for me during this time. Rarely was there any sense of judgment or condemnation. A very few members of our meeting felt betrayed, or were angry that Sid

³² 1994 Minutes of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Conservative)

had been serving in the meeting during his active addiction, but as time passed I believe these Friends came to understand the concept conveyed in the words of one of the 12-step tools: “We did many people great harm, but most of all we harmed ourselves.”

After Sid was released from jail, he tried to go back to house painting. In this he felt unfulfilled: he felt that he was, perhaps, not making the best use of his God-given gifts. In conversation with Friendship members, it seemed like a good next step would be sitting with a clearness committee. Through that time of listening within worship, Sid felt clear to pursue further education. An Associate’s Degree in Substance Abuse Counseling was being initiated at the local community college; Sid entered and completed that program, graduating with a 4.0. He then entered Guilford College to complete his undergraduate degree in Spanish with a minor in Peace and Conflict Studies, graduating with departmental honors. Sid made extremely good use of his opportunity to pursue higher education, winning several awards, one of which spoke of his influence and mentoring of other students.

Sid’s first job after graduation was in the prison system, bringing group substance abuse work to the incarcerated Hispanic population. Sadly the funding for this innovative program was cut by the state, at which point Sid worked for some years in county mental health. Currently Sid serves the medical profession through monitoring doctors, physician’s assistants and veterinarians who have drug and/or alcohol issues. He makes himself very available to anyone who is touched by this terrible disease, talking with those who suffer from it, and providing a listening heart and sometimes counsel for the family members and friends who need guidance in ways forward.

Living in community is messy at best. When the members of our faith community know our condition, they are better able to support us in that condition. In our yearly meeting we felt safe to share what was going on with us. We also trusted the community to receive this with tenderness and concern. Our lived experience of the NCYM-C community was, and is, that of unconditional love. We are grateful beyond words for that experience and hold it as a model for all our interactions. We strive to live into the condition so beautifully expressed by Isaac Pennington at the beginning of this essay.

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