

Releasing Our Light From Under the Bushel

Some thoughts on outreach

by Daphne Davey

The "Advancement" part of Home Mission and Advancement Committee's (HMAC) title refers to what we call "outreach"--the efforts of Monthly Meetings, Worship Groups and Isolated Friends to reach out to the non-Quaker community.

Unfortunately, the idea of reaching out to non-Quakers seems to cause some Friends discomfort--even, I suspect in some instances, repulsion. I thought it would be interesting to explore this subject a little, especially in light of HMAC's mandate to "advance" Canadian Yearly Meeting! For a starting point I have separated "outreach" (somewhat arbitrarily) into three levels:

1. *Advising the public of a Meeting's presence:* when and where it holds Meeting for Worship and other activities, how to find the building, and who to contact for more information. Activities might include phone or newspaper listings, advertisements, building signs, web site.

2. *Advising the public of our Quaker beliefs and practices:* our testimonies, who we welcome to Meeting, how we conduct our affairs. Activities might include posters, feature articles, community resource information directory, an "open house," speaking to other groups.

3. *Engaging interested members of the public in a deeper level of discussion of Quaker beliefs and practices:* Activities might include talks to other groups (church, social action), a "Quaker 101" evening, participating in interfaith events, "speaking truth to power" with politicians, and one-on-one discussions with enquirers.

I cannot claim an in-depth knowledge of Quaker history, but even a single reading of George Fox's diary reveals over and over that the early Friends conducted much of their worship and witness *in public*. They gathered in fields and on hillsides to "wait upon the Lord," walked into "steeplehouses" to challenge the preachings of the hireling ministers, refused to bow to power-mongering in the courts, and prospered as honest merchants--all in public. It was thanks to the public nature of the early Friends' activities that many "floating" Seekers found a home in the Religious Society of Friends.

Why, then, today is there some hesitation about outreach? What happened in between to put us latter-day Friends off the idea of "publicizing" our Society? Our most cherished belief of "that of God in every one" precludes us from coercing others to our views, and in the same vein we resist being coerced by others. Quakers have chosen to omit the priest-intermediary in order to foster a direct relationship with God "...in the pure knowledge of God, and of Christ alone, without the help of any

man..." (*Fox's Journal, 1647*). We know what we know "experimentally" from the inspiration of the God Within, not from unhealthy external pressure. Yet should we retreat from the world to the extent that some Quakers do not even approve of activities listed under (1) above?

Harvey Gillman has written an interesting article (which I hope can be published in an upcoming issue of *The Canadian Friend*) on a number of key words which various religious groups use when they wish to publicize their religious principles. He discusses the meaning and use of terms such as "mission," "service," "evangelism," "evangelization" (which is different) and, of course, "proselytize," offering Friendly insights into each. He also says, "What are we doing when we get involved in Quaker outreach? We are addressing that of God in those we meet and we are being addressed in return. The light in one is reflected by the light in the other. The seed, the voice, the Christ within is thus affirmed. Outreach is a process of liberation." I like his own term, "spiritual hospitality." It feels friendly!

It is the term "proselytizing" which, I think, hangs up some Friends. However, I cannot see that this dread word can possibly apply to (1) or (2) above. Nor can it apply to (3) above, because it is not Friends' way to coerce anyone to listen to our spiritual message or pressure anyone to join our Meeting or espouse our testimonies. But making our presence known in the wider community, for the information of those who might potentially be interested, can only bring us benefit.

I have heard about new attenders at Friends meetings exclaiming, "Boy, were you folks *hard to find!* I've been trying to track you down for ages." I find this rather a sad commentary. Having found our own way to The Religious Society of Friends, are we then so poor in spirit that we do not wish to let others in on the party? Or are we so introverted that we have tuned out our surroundings, our neighbourhood, our non-Quaker community thereby closing the door to opportunities for spiritual enrichment, Meeting revitalization, even last-ditch rescue?

It would be an interesting exercise for each of us to recall just how and where our own attention was drawn to Quakers (these days the vast majority of us are Quakers by conviction, not birthright Friends). Did we walk by a Meetinghouse, read the sign outside, and wonder what went on inside? Did we come across some printed material a library book, a newspaper listing? Did we meet someone at a rally or workshop who identified themselves as a Quaker? Did we attend a Meeting's "open house"? Were we surfing the internet and came across a Quaker web site? If so, then we were reached through outreach.

Since last fall, an internet-based discussion group founded by Canadian Friends, the Quaker Outreach Forum*, has been

buzzing. Having weathered a "proselytizing" storm, the remaining members (including Friends in the UK and one in Seoul) are swapping ideas on outreach activities, and sharing success stories. We have also heard sad tales of Meetings which failed to reach out to visitors (even visiting Friends!) as close as their very front door. HMAc is monitoring this Forum, to collect its wisdom (and material from other sources) and develop a useful means to share this information among Friends within the Yearly Meeting.

While HMAc has not been able to spend as much time on the area of "advancement" as it would wish in the last couple of years, our committee does currently offer a few outreach services, including:

- ±□ funding for Meetings, Worship Groups or Isolated Friends for outreach activities/events
- ±□ information on outreach resource publications
- ±□ free copies of Jane Orion Smith's pamphlet *Growing the Blessed Community: Ideas for Outreach and Inreach* (order from the Quaker Book Service)

- ±□ free Enquirers Packages of introductory pamphlets (order from the Quaker Book Service)
- ±□ planned regional and national workshops within CYM on Outreach
- ±□ referrals to other outreach services/resources, such as Friends General Conference

I would encourage Friends to apply to the subject of outreach what we as a Society can do very well faithfully and continuously review our beliefs and actions in light of our testimonies and experiences, then move forward with greater understanding into a practical application of that which has been revealed to us under the guidance of the Light Within.

* To subscribe (free) to the Quaker Outreach Forum, contact Bruce Dienes at bdienes@caplex.com
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