

The Love of God: Drawing the Branches Together

By Micah Bales, Great Plains Yearly Meeting

Micah Bales is a member of Heartland Friends Meeting, in Wichita, Kansas, a part of Great Plains Yearly Meeting (FUM). He is a recent graduate of Earlham School of Religion and is presently engaged in travelling ministry among Friends in Great Plains Yearly Meeting and the wider region. Micah was one of the planners of the YAF gathering at Earlham in May of 2008. Since meeting him at the World Gathering of Young Friends in 2005, I have witnessed Micah's growing concern for promoting and nurturing friendship between Friends from different branches of the Quaker family, and for the encouragement of young adult Friends worldwide. Knowing of this ministry, I asked him to write about the current Young Adult Friend movement. (Ed.).

It's easy for younger Friends to get discouraged. For some of us, we grew up in our local Meeting, and now, in the process of becoming adults, we're unsure of how we fit in anymore. Our Meeting was a place where we could get still and know God in a way that we had never found before. But lately we have had the nagging suspicion that there is more to life in the Spirit than just attending Meeting for Worship once a week, buying fair trade, and participating in social activism. For many of us, there is a growing sense that something is missing. Even if we can't articulate it, we know that God desires more from us than the lives that we are presently leading.

This discomfort is a gift of the Spirit. It is the Seed of Christ aching within our hearts, calling us to a truer and deeper life than we have ever dared to live. The Light is pressing on our hearts, asking to come in. The process of giving ourselves over to the Light within begins with asking our Creator: "What is *your* will, God? Show me how I am to live and give me the strength to walk in *your* way". However, as we allow the Light to shine in our hearts and reveal the brokenness, rebellion, and alienation from God that we carry within ourselves, we are often tempted to project our own struggles onto others. Why aren't *they* living up to what God is

calling us to? There is a lot of truth in questions like this. In many cases, Friends aren't living lives worthy of the calling that God has for us as a people. But change begins in the heart of each person. God is calling us to first be changed ourselves. When we open ourselves to the Light and allow ourselves to be stripped down and built back up in the image of God, we will be made into instruments of God's will.

Fortunately, we are not called to walk this often painful road of inward transformation alone. When God calls us into the love of Christ, God also calls us into fellowship with other Friends of the Truth. Some who had previously been strangers are revealed as brothers and sisters who are madly in love with God. Somehow we know them more deeply than we ever thought possible: We know them because God knows us; we love them because God loves us.

And we are often surprised by whom we are united with in gospel love. The basis of the Young Adult Friends movement is the bond of love that miraculously springs to life among younger Friends who are beginning to turn towards the Light and discover that there are fellow followers of Truth from across the Religious Society of Friends. Where previously we had assumed that our particular brand of Quakerism was the only authentic one, we now find that God is indeed at work in all the branches – among Liberal Friends, Conservative Friends and Evangelical Friends. God loves all of us and unites us in the bond of peace. God has let us know that we are being called to something larger than ourselves - or our branch of the Quaker community.

But simply loving others in some abstract way isn't enough. We find that God is calling us to be in relationship with Friends from other branches of Quakerism. In many ways, our differences are so great that sometimes it seems we have nothing in common besides a shared history. But God has made us a people. God has already united us in the Spirit and in the bond of peace. We are called to come together as the people of God. Some of us saw this in Burlington, New Jersey, in February 2007, when the Holy Spirit drew us together and showed us that we are indeed one body. And this past