

When I lie awake at night thinking about this unsettling ambiguous letter, about my beloved Yearly Meeting, and about Friends United Meeting as a whole, I often find myself writing letters and scripting conversations in my mind. In these imaginary communications I explain to Southeastern Yearly Meeting, my Quaker family, why I, a transgender, queer, unprogrammed young adult Friend who couldn't talk un-ironically about Jesus until I was almost out of high school, am aching for us to maintain our relationship with Friends United Meeting.

First, let me say that this position is a huge transformation from what I originally felt and thought when our FUM membership became a live issue. As a queer person who has experienced a vocational call to religious service, FUM's personnel policy seemed to me not only wrong in a general, moral sense, but also personally painful. I didn't see much reason to stay in an organization with such a discriminatory policy - particularly since, as far as I could see, we didn't have much of a relationship to begin with. Growing up in SEYM, I was unaware for years that such a thing as programmed Friends or Friends United Meeting existed - despite the fact that they constitute the majority of Quakers in the world today. I was shocked when, probably in my mid-teens, I discovered that my ultra-liberal yearly meeting was actually a member of Friends United Meeting. It didn't make any sense to me, mostly because I was embedded in the "us and them" mentality of a culture - in Quakerism and beyond it - that sees Christianity as a monolithic entity of socially conservative fundamentalism.

The deconstruction of those us/them categories is one of the reasons I long for us to have a fully engaged relationship with Friends United Meeting. As long as we are members of FUM, they (Christians, programmed Friends--whoever) cannot be "the other". If we begin to think of them that way, our illusion will be shattered by the individual relationships that are facilitated by institutional affiliation. I don't mean to say that our cultural and theological differences across branches are superficial. I believe them in most cases to be quite profound. But over the past few years, I have made some wonderful connections with Friends from solely

FUM-affiliated Meetings, and I have seen that they are my spiritual kin. They are people like Terri, the wonderful, warm staff person whom FUM has sent to our annual sessions for the past three years, who has become a beloved part of our community. Or like my friend Cheryl, who is in a committed lesbian partnership and has laboured for years with her FUM-affiliated Yearly Meeting to have them endorse the recording that her monthly meeting has given her as a minister. Or like my friend Betsy, who loves Jesus, preaches like wildfire, and just opened a store in her town dedicated to eco-friendly living. FUM, like Christianity as a whole, is far from being a monolith, but we will never know that if we don't maintain meaningful individual and collective relationships within it.

But wait - we have lots of Christians in our Yearly Meeting! We can learn these lessons from them, right? Which brings me to my next point. I had no idea how theologically diverse my Yearly Meeting was, until we started talking about our relationship to Friends United Meeting. I don't think this is a coincidence. Our discernment process has asked deep questions: Who are we, in SEYM? What do we believe? What language do we, should we use? Is Christianity a part of our identity as Friends, and if not, what is our relationship to a Quaker movement that has seen itself through several centuries as primitive/restorationist Christianity? Simply having these questions posed, and held firmly in our collective consciousness, opened up space for Friends in our Yearly Meeting to speak their most authentic spiritual language. Suddenly we were talking about the Bible, and asking each other about Jesus. I experienced a new depth and richness in our worship as we became more comfortable hearing each other's truth spoken on its own terms. It was struggle that pushed us to be more honest with one another, and I fear that, should we decide to give up on the challenge of authentic relationship with FUM, we will slowly go back to the way things were. Our spiritual language will shrink back to a tight, sterilized collection of inoffensive words.

So, what about the personnel policy? We were advised early on in our discernment process that we should not choose to remain affiliated with FUM in order to change the policy.