

FRIENDS' PEACE WITNESS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

A REPORT FROM THE FWCC CONFERENCE ON QUAKERS' RESPONSES TO THE GROWING DANGER OF GLOBAL WAR AND TERRORISM

INTRODUCTION

In January of 2003, Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas convened a conference for Quakers in the United States and Canada: *Friends' Peace Witness in a Time of Crisis*. Its purpose was to bring Quakers together around the issues of our responses to "the growing danger of global war and terrorism." The conference was held at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, where many notable FWCC events have been hosted in the past.

About 250 Friends attended, from all the branches of Friends in North America (Conservative, Evangelical, Friends United Meeting, General Conference/Liberal, and Independents). Over 25% were young adult Friends. Some attendees were longtime peace activists, while others were just taking up the work; all, whether actively engaged in peace work or not, were there hoping to share with and learn from each other.

The general feedback from those who attended the conference is that it was a wonderful beginning, an opportunity for Friends to remind ourselves of the Biblical and spiritual basis of peacemaking work and to "recharge the batteries" of those deeply involved in such efforts. In a time and place where advocates of nonviolence are unpopular, seen as unpatriotic and even subversive, it is easy to become discouraged. Many attendees said they left the conference with their spirits refreshed and their courage lifted.

The report that follows was written by Rolene Walker, co-clerk of the committee that planned the conference. It was presented to the Annual Meeting of FWCC Section of the Americas at our sessions in March of this year.

Rolene summarized the final panel presentation of the conference, in which a group of four Friends presented their observations and leadings gleaned during the weekend. Those Friends were Deborah Fisch (Friends General Conference), Bridget Moix (Friends Committee on National Legislation), Ben Richmond (Friends United Meeting), and Jan Wood (GOOD NEWS Associates). Gordon Browne (former Executive Secretary and Clerk of the Section of the Americas) moderated the panel discussion.

The discussion is ongoing, and we invite you to join in. For anyone with internet access, there is an online site on which FWCC is continuing to encourage networking and exchanging ideas. Log on to the "virtual conference" at <http://www.friendspeace.org> to read texts of the presentations from the original conference, as well as feedback and additional contributions, and to contribute your own thoughts to the conversation.

In addition, FWCC Section of the Americas hopes to continue and expand our efforts to bring Friends together with members of the other "historic peace churches" (Mennonites and Brethren), as well as other religious groups, around issues of peacemaking and peace witness.

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

A SUMMARY OF THE JANUARY, 2003 FWCC PEACE CONFERENCE

*We are blessed as peacemakers not in the future, but now. As part of the report of the Peace Issues Working Group to Annual Meeting on the Peace Conference held at Guilford College, Greensboro, NC, January 17-20, 2003, this report attempts to convey some of the sense of the conference as shared by the closing panel, entitled **Visioning and Empowering Peace Witness Among Friends**. Each of the four panelists was asked to reflect upon the following queries:*

- *What have we learned about ourselves as Friends in relationship to peacemaking?*
- *What are our visions as peacemakers in these troubled times?*
- *What can we say to one another and also to our wider communities in working toward lasting peace?*
- *What are our on-going struggles and growing edges and our affirmations and convictions?*
- *How might the Spirit be leading and empowering us now, especially in light of Jesus' message, "Blessed are the peacemakers?"*

The following are paraphrases of the words of these panelists.

GOD'S BLESSING

There is a distinct blessing God gives peacemakers. God would like to bless us individually, so we are asked three things: 1) to accept for ourselves our name from the Creator directly. Friends don't do a very good job of naming their gifts; 2) to accept the affirmation of who we are, clumsy and wounded, yet enough to be fully faithful, and affirmed by God; 3) to recognize that we are empowered. Accept it as part of the blessing. We are called sons and daughters of God. We carry the very DNA of God's heart. What we are called to do is the very face of God moving on the earth.

It is clear we are facing a different set of circumstances in our world today, sometimes baffling ones. We need to be ready to wrestle with the Spirit about what we are being called to now, both as individuals and as meetings, and as a faith community. These are dangerous and difficult times. Both religious and scientific communities are telling us we are facing apocalypse.

INWARD CALL

There is fear among us, as well as capability, and it seems overwhelming. At worship we have felt the spirit of God among us asking us to come and join the redemptive agenda. When God asks us, "would you like to be on my team?" our angst falls away. As we heard in worship, every instant, in every encounter Christ is born again or crucified by our choices. It is a high honor, a privilege that the Sovereign of the universe has invited us to join

the team. The peace testimony is not the foundation of the Religious Society of Friends. We are rooted and grounded in love. The fruits of that faith are SPICE: simplicity, peace, integrity, community and equality. There is a hunger for all these fruits to be healthy fruits. If we want healthy fruit, we must nurture the root. Let us not mistake the food the world wants to give us – it's not what we're hungry for. We are hungry for mother's milk, milk of the Spirit. We are rooted in the power that takes away the occasion of all war, which helps us understand and remove the roots of violence and war in ourselves and in the world. One of the most notable things about this conference was the lack of tension between Friends who wanted more worship and those who wanted more action. It was clear we couldn't move forward without being strong in both.

INNER PEACE

People asked for time, more time—to listen in worship. We realized that we need to create peace in ourselves—we can't give what we don't have. Being a pacifist is not the absence of or abstention from war making, but proactively waiting on the Holy Spirit to lead us in love, to live in that love and to share it with the world. We need basic peaceful living skills. We cannot share this love from a place of fear. Nor can we share this love from a place of anger and impatience.

Peace and justice don't depend on our wisdom. God has chosen, even so, to use us to

give expression to peace and justice from God's heart. We have been told the peace testimony is not propositional, but an unfolding story revealed as we attend to the whispered word of God. We have seen the testimony of Christ and experienced the joy. We have told each other of miracles—the inbreaking of the resurrectional life. It is most radical to invite others to join in the community of faith—we all must be evangelicals!

A RENEWED COVENANT

George Fox wrote that he had come into the covenant of peace that was before all wars and strife. We came together in the covenant community in Greensboro. The covenant is everlasting. God has not faltered. What we heard this weekend and what we will continue to do is to renew the covenant with God and each other. It is a covenant of struggle, and by renewing it we are committing ourselves to being faithful in spite of the uncertainty and paradoxical truth.

Part of our deepened understanding is not just that it is a covenant with us as individuals, but a covenant that must be renewed corporately. We have heard incredible stories of individuals, but they are not complete until they are joined. One Friend spoke a thank you and told us how good it is to be part of the fabric of the community that holds us accountable and holds us in God's grace. The cloud of witnesses fills in the chairs between us—all the Friends who have come before have built the foundation we stand on. They are here present as we renew the covenant with them.

How come the early Friends were so energetic and accomplished so much? They went to meeting expecting to be changed. They laid down their burdens at the door of the meeting house and expected to be changed every time they went in. Early Friends wrestled with God every day.

A Friend visited the giant redwood trees in California and imagined how deep their roots must be. She was told they are not deep, but are very wide and intermingle with the roots of other trees in the grove, and this is what gives them their ability to withstand the winds and grow so tall. This is how we can grow, tall and with wide roots, not one or the other, but both at the same time.

LISTEN, TEST, DO

Because we live in a community that upholds a peace testimony, we actually listen and take risks to go into dangerous places. The real question is how we build a faith community that is devoted to peace. We can't be peaceful unless we are in touch and in close contact with a community that supports it. Maybe we need to start a campaign for the next five years. Enhance the ability for Quakers to live peacefully. We can accomplish that by bringing more people in touch with the spirit.

We were told, "Listen, test, and then do it".

1) Listen to each other. We have important things to share: hopes, victories, failures, and fears. When we share in love, the fears diminish. 2) Test a leading. Sometimes we hear wrong. It's sort of like a crackly cell phone out of range. We can ask Friends to listen with and for us, and together we come closer to getting it right. Sometimes we hear God's message, but don't hear "wait" (or "go"). 3) Finally, we need to get out and do. We can do it with our community behind us. We can help each other to take the first step. We're like parents and siblings to each other. We are children and sometimes we need encouragement in community. We can do it for each other.

As we step out to do the work God calls us to do, and discern together to get as close to the truth as we can, we're at the beginning of the final step. It's important to remember that it begins with a step. It doesn't have to wait until we have it together, in fact it can't. Jesus didn't wait until the 12 disciples had it together; he sent them out twice. After he died, and they still didn't have it together, he came back again and gave them jobs to do.

A young Friend on the last panel expressed gratitude for the intensity and enormity of the gift the Society of Friends offers to her generation. Young Friends are not looking back over years of peacemaking and wondering how we got here, but rather are looking forward to how the tradition of peacemaking in a world so distraught can be continued. They feel they can build and live in the world despite whatever comes because they see remarkable human beings among Friends. It is a

gift to be brought into the covenant with older Friends and be bound up in it. It is not just the peace testimony that binds us, but a deep and true hope—in the covenant with God and with each other. As one young Friend said, may we shake with joy!

SEND OUT PEACEMAKERS INTO THE WORLD

The world is in desperate need of peacemakers now. The tension between God's heart for justice and heart for peace was named in the story of the Good Samaritan. Are we like the priest who passed on the other side congratulating ourselves because we don't beat anyone up, calling for lessening of violence, while forgetting the victim? Is our life style arming the robber? Fifty years from now, what will be said when someone asks what the Quakers were doing during this time of war?

A young Friend was struck by how much witnessing for peace there is already. This conference hints at the issues Quakers are working on. There are various actions full of practical expressions, and the FWCC Peace Conference website (www.friendspeace.org) will be a tremendous resource. Three things stood out in the workshops and panels. First, the workshop on an Unarmed Nonviolent Peaceforce suggested every meeting might sponsor one of us to be participants on a peace team, either long-or short-term. Second, as the U.S. moves to perpetual war and multiple wars around the world, God is asking meetings to spend special attention to all, and especially the young and conscientious objectors about the peace testimony. Military war is one expression of the apocalypse. And third, meetings should be holding each of us accountable in our life styles and possessions, to see, as John Woolman said, where the seeds of war are planted.

Now is the time. It has already come, and has always been. It is our moment to say yes if we are called to the edge. We need to listen and find the faith to help each other be accountable to the truth in all of us. The early Friends had the Valiant 60 (not the valiant 100,000). Not everyone is called to the edge, but we need to invite each other to go there, and promise we will go together. If we're

not faithful to our part, we can't help those who are called to the edge. In one meeting, they decided not to keep the meetinghouse heated during the week, so two Friends had to go several hours early to heat it. If they hadn't, no one could have worshipped. If we are called to tend fire, let us do it well. If we are called to hold the world in prayer, let us do it with careful intention.

SOMETHING AWAKENED

Something awakened at this peace gathering. It's hard to know exactly what direction it will take, but Quakers can work miracles when they discern, test, and then act on leadings. We are not a peace community. We are the family of God.

We may have no papers to send home. We are, however, sending each other home with the resolve to be faithful with the hope of the world we have already envisioned, with the joy God has given us. Where does a renewed covenant of peace lead us? What does it require of us today? It will cost us. It will endanger us. And it will fulfill us; that is what we are telling each other.

It's not just the first Friends who were called to renew the covenant of peace. News headlines the day after this conference didn't read, "Quakers held a peace conference again. Still against war." John Woolman only saw 2% of Friends give up slavery in his lifetime. However, he started Friends, and in fact a country, on a big journey against slavery. This conference was just such a watershed, especially for young Friends. One young Friend talked about walking across 23 countries. Another ministered of being a warrior and an outrider, and reported back that the lifestyle of many of wealthy people in our countries is making it impossible for the rest of the world to survive, and that the earth is dying. He is ready and waiting to ride.

We are called now to a big change. We will need to reorder our own lives. We will need to reach out to give deeply to others, the most vulnerable. We need to work publicly to change policy and political systems in ground-shaking ways. We will be called to work hard, diligently and lovingly. It is an enormous call.