

2010.26 A Message to Friends reconsidering New England Yearly Meeting's commitment to Friends United Meeting

The following letter will be sent to South Berkshire Monthly Meeting. It will also be sent to Connecticut Valley Quarterly Meeting, and to the Permanent Board of New England Yearly Meeting starting with the second sentence.

Dear Friends,

We thank you for the expression of your concerns for Friends United Meeting and New England Yearly Meeting. As a people gathered and moved by the Light within us, Northampton Friends Meeting bears witness to the blessings we have received while carrying two of our ministries: our support for gay and lesbian Friends, and our commitment to participate in the world wide community of Friends. Although some have come to feel these two ministries are in contradiction, in our experience they have gone hand in hand ever since our earliest gatherings as a worship group and a monthly meeting.

Regarding our ministry of support for gay and lesbian Friends and same-sex marriage, this is our experience and our witness:

- We witness that the Light is present among people of all sexual orientations and gender identities or gender expressions. We experience our sexuality and sexual identity as integral components of who we are as children of God.
- We recognize and witness to the gifts of Spirit sent us through the life and ministry of gay and lesbian Friends.
- We are committed to giving support to our children as they discern whatever sexual orientation or gender identity the Spirit leads them to.
- We have been taking under our care the marriages of gay and lesbian Friends from the very beginning of our life as a monthly meeting. We have under our care the marriage of one of the families party to the Massachusetts Supreme Court case that established the gay and lesbian right to marriage in our Commonwealth.

We give thanks for the unity that is clearly emerging in our yearly meeting about these concerns (see NEYM minute 09-53 attached).

Our commitment to the diverse family of Friends begins with our meeting's deep involvement with New England Yearly Meeting. A high percentage of our members attend NEYM's annual sessions, and many participate in its committees and leadership. In addition, we have helped in the founding and maintenance of our yearly meeting's sister relationship with Cuba Yearly Meeting, also members of FUM, despite our recognition that Cuba Yearly Meeting does not share or understand our support of gay and lesbian Friends. Many of our members have served as NEYM representatives to Friends United Meeting and to Friends World Committee for Consultation, or traveled among other yearly meetings both in the US and abroad. Some of us have been witnesses to the work of FUM in Ramallah during unending years of Middle Eastern conflict, in Cuba throughout decades of isolation, and as we hear of Friends in Kenya turning into peace brokers in the midst of catastrophic political violence. Whenever we are challenged to speak about what Quakers can do in our troubled world, we are blessed to be able to count ourselves in the same family

that includes these brave and faithful Quakers in Friends United Meeting. Without them in our extended family of Friends, our Quakerism would feel provincially smaller and less relevant to the world at large.

We have also participated actively in our yearly meeting's process of discernment regarding Friends United Meeting and its personnel policy. In 2005 New England Yearly Meeting minuted our pain at the implied condemnation contained in the FUM policy that excludes from leadership some in our midst. Despite this pain, New England Yearly Meeting also minuted the value of our connections with Friends throughout the world and our intention to remain a full member of Friends United Meeting, even as we affirmed our intention to work to change this discriminatory policy (see NEYM minute 05-60 attached).

Just as Northampton Friends has been faithful and patient with the process which has been transforming the thinking and behavior of New England Quakers, we also believe it has been given to us to stay in the FUM family and to witness among them as committed family members. Those of us who have traveled among FUM Friends have carried this concern on behalf of NEYM both publicly and in private conversations. With a non-confrontational tenderness we have sown many seeds in surprisingly receptive ground. Some of us have also been sought out by closeted Friends and their families asking for the support and pastoral care which is not provided by their own meetings. We have learned that, though the leadership of some yearly meetings may speak with one implacable voice, there are many in those yearly meetings who are grateful for our company in their quiet hope for change, but feel unable to raise the issue at this time. Our testimony that gay and lesbian Friends carry the fruits of the Spirit among us has been received by many who had not heard it before in their Quaker experience.

More than a decade ago we decided to inscribe in our budget a line for a direct monthly meeting contribution to FUM. Even if the allocation said \$0.00 for a long, long time, because we lacked unity on an actual figure, that \$0.00 marked our desire to labor with each other in love. From 2008 to 2009 we were surprised by a sobering joy as the Spirit called two of our founding members, one of them a lesbian, to attend the FUM triennial in North Carolina. After they reported on their experience and on their intensified commitment to seeing themselves as part of Friends United Meeting, we united on the approval of a budget that included the direct contribution from Northampton Friends to Friends United Meeting of a small but very resonant donation.

We want you to know about our experiences carrying our ministry of gay and lesbian affirmations together with our calling to stand firm in the fullness of our relationship to Quakers who do not agree with these affirmations. The Spirit moves us to appeal to all Friends who would break off relationships rather than continue the slow, loving labor toward unity. Some of the most moving voices asking for loving patience towards people who express hurtful opinions or tolerate discriminatory policies have been those of gay and lesbian Friends among us, whose hearts have been tendered by their own pain and struggle. We ask you to prayerfully consider our meeting's experience in this deep and slow ministry of reconciliation.

Approved by Northampton Friends Meeting 3rd month, 14th day, 2010

