

IOWA YM (FUM) 2009
The Living Stone and a Chosen People
1 Peter 2:4-10

Iowa YM (FM) and Iowa YM (Conservative) met at the same time this week, but at different parts of the state. The Conservative YM was at Scattergood School just outside West Branch in the east, and the FUM YM was in Oskaloosa about 50 miles from Des Moines into which I had flown. I decided to do a dash to Scattergood to meet with old Friends (including Martha Davis, Marion Love and some of the residents of Wesley Village (Tjossems, Kislings, Bivens, Hamptons) and current reps. I had time to talk to Stan Sanders and others about a hoped-for North High Plains regional gathering in Iowa next year and promised to identify interested members of the other YM who might form a planning committee.

That task achieved, I turned around and drove through the evening sun along country roads to Oskaloosa, and my host Margaret Stoltzfus. There was no soothing classical radio station to listen to but as the dial searched up and down I heard a snatch of *John Deere Green* (Billy-Bob loves Charlene...) which, in my early months as a city girl in the corn and soy heartland of Indiana, had seemed like an anthem to my new life, so I kept this local Oskaloosa station on. I was stunned to hear a William Penn moment when a student described the development of a new mission statement and the importance of Quaker values in shaping its work. I loved the brevity and focus of the mission statement¹ and thought that some colleges could take note.

We gathered next morning in the Students' Union of William Penn University, Oskaloosa, and were greeted by interim President Ann Fields who told us something of her own educational journey (farm wife until bankruptcy forced major change at 40 and the beginning of higher education) and the way in which Penn is now setting its programming priorities by using the "screen" of leadership, technology and Quaker values to shape its curriculum.

The format of the sessions was board meetings on the Thursday morning, a business session in the afternoon and a Concert of Prayer in the evening at College Avenue Friends Church, a mile or so away. Friday was the second business session (there were only two), workshops and again evening worship at College Avenue. Saturday morning were Bible hour and Quaker Men/USFW followed by the Noon Missions Banquet at which Eirena Escalona González of Cuba spoke. It was followed by a golf outing and alternative leisure events, a picnic and evening outdoor worship service. Yearly Meeting concluded on the Sunday morning with a service at College Avenue Friends at which Superintendent Ron Bryan brought the message.

The yearly meeting sessions is now called a Ministry Conference, and that reflects its character. The focus (and location) of the large amount of (entirely programmed) worship is less on the business sessions and more on corporate and personal revival. The first evening's Concert of Prayer consisted of the reading of texts from Matthew, Mark and I Corinthians, intense small group vocal prayers for specific issues and contemporary Christian music. The second evening's service was a more traditional revival service with lengthy and energetic

¹ *William Penn University provides the opportunity for an educational experience with a focus on leadership, technology and the Quaker principles of simplicity, peace-making, integrity, community and equality.*

preaching by Bob Adhikary (Evangelical Friends Mission, Nepal.) While culturally Iowa YM is clearly part of FUM, at times it can feel more like an EFCI yearly meeting.

But business is certainly carried out at yearly meeting sessions, also. In addition to the thirty or so reports that had to be approved (briskly introduced by committee clerks or staff on the assumption that participants would have read documents in advance) and speedily approved, there was one challenging item that was handled particularly sensitively. This was the withdrawal of Pleasant Ridge Community Church from the yearly meeting. A change in direction and leadership of the church and a loosening of connection and communication over three decades had led to a parting of the ways. The church had no interest in identification with Friends. But what about property? Other denominations are in litigation over what happens to the buildings and assets in situations such as this. But having considered the issues prayerfully over time, and having taken legal advice, the yearly meeting had become clear that it was willing to agree to the church withdrawing from the yearly meeting and having the property – provided it sent a delegation to the yearly meeting sessions for a public recognition of the event and, I thought, a kind of public blessing in which they were told that the door was open if they ever wished to return. It must have been a difficult issue but I thought it was handled with grace and wisdom and both the congregation and the yearly meeting were able to move forward unencumbered.

The first recorded revival meeting among Friends took place at Bear Creek, Madison County, west of Des Moines, in 1867. This was the beginning of the decade of struggle between the old ways and the intensity of emotional revivals that could last up to five hours at a time over several days. A decade later, a split among Orthodox Friends between the ‘Wilburite’ traditionalists and the ‘Gurneyite’ evangelicals was inevitable. 140 years later there is a yearning for a revival of that original fire. But times have changed and the attempt to plant a new evangelical church in Des Moines (where the old one was laid down) is going slowly. It will probably begin in a William Penn College for Working adults in West Des Moines. There are other Church Extension projects in the works and I sense a deep wish to get back to the fervent energy that birthed the yearly meeting but times have changed and like many yearly meetings, Iowa is challenged by demographics and the need to balance the budget to pay for all the work it would like to do.

Responding to change was an undercurrent that I noticed. Here are two of several examples. Quakerdale is a service for troubled children. In the past it was seen as a place where children were sent by the courts for treatment. It was always more than that, but it is now reinventing itself to be a place that families would look to for support. This means changing its financial structure from relying on state funding and doing an energetic program of marketing and public relations as well as developing innovative programming. Mesquakie was a Christian mission to a Native American community in Tama, on the prairie, funded by the Associated Committee of Friends on Indian Affairs. Several years ago ACFIA handed over the direct responsibility for the missions to several yearly meetings including Iowa, so both Iowa and the staff at Mesquakie and the community it serves have to develop new ways of working based on mutuality, while navigating the sensitive financial relationships.

One of the joys of attending a yearly meeting session as a visitor is getting to know a community a little better. Margaret Stoltzfus took me to Smokey Row², an excellent coffee house on the town square, and introduced me to the Book Vault³, an independent bookstore located in an old bank. I learned a little of the positive impact on the local economy of Musco Lighting which is an international leader in stadium lighting, one third of whose workforce is based in Oskaloosa. It was also a time for deepening friendships. I reconnected with three people from February's FUM Cuba work team, and Margaret hosted two other friends who had traveled to Oskaloosa for yearly meeting sessions. In addition to all that business and worship, I have memories of sitting in Margaret's back yard sipping early morning coffee watching birds at feeders. And it may be the only yearly meeting in the world where Friends go at the end of a long day to eat ice cream at a hut called the Frosty Udder.

² <http://www.smokeyrow.com/Oskaloosa.html>

³ <http://www.bookvault.org/NASApp/store/Index.jsp;jsessionid=bacH9PbOnThLI92Y0sjns>