SAYMA Monthly Meetings' Responses to Queries for Friends on Quaker Witness and the Work of the American Friends Service Committee
April-May 2010

At the recent American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Corporation Meeting (March 3, 2012), SAYMA's appointed Corporation members received a request from the AFSC Friends Relations Committee (AFR Committee) to ask Friends to consider three queries "...on Quaker witness and the work of the American Friends Service Committee." In its request, the AFR Committee asked for "appropriate contacts" in the SAYMA to whom these queries should be addressed.

In discussion with the Clerk of the committee, your Corporation members learned that the AFR Committee wanted to have responses to the queries from yearly meetings by the fall of this year. As SAYMA's yearly meeting agenda was already planned, we concluded that the best way to provide responses from SAYMA Friends would be to ask monthly meetings to consider them through a discussion or worship sharing session. The AFR Committee did not request a minuted response from yearly meetings.

Representative Meeting #128 (March 10, 2012) asked monthly meetings and worship groups to consider these queries and respond to the Corporation Members by May 15. Six meetings and one worship group sent the responses below.

AFR Queries

1. What one or two aspects of AFSC programs speak most clearly to your discernment of Quaker witness?
2. Is there a particular need or opportunity in your yearly meeting's region for work furthering Friends' Testimonies - work that Friends in your yearly meeting might support and take on - perhaps with guidance or coordination with AFSC? How are you working on this now?

(A third query was inadvertently omitted from the mailing, because of an error in scanning the AFR request for distribution by electronic mail. Unfortunately, the AFR Committee did not supply queries in electronic form. That query asked, "In what ways might AFSC more fully express Friends truths and hopes for the world?" To some degree, that query expands on the second query that all groups addressed. Perhaps these responses address it partially as well).

Common themes in SAYMA responses

Friends had some difficulty identifying *aspects* of AFSC programs, and instead tended to describe programs that they felt spoke to Quaker witness. Part of the explanation for this may be that in several meetings, Friends noted they had little knowledge of the programs themselves. Some wanted more contact with the AFSC. Friends in two meetings expressed concern about inconsistencies of some programs or activities with Quaker witness.

Economic justice, environmental stewardship/witness, prisons and the justice system, and peace were frequently mentioned, either in the context of Quaker witness or of needed support for meeting concerns. Immigration was the most commonly mentioned opportunity for further work mentioned by SAYMA meetings.

Two meetings hoped for increased opportunities for Quaker volunteer service with the AFSC. One meeting put into words a thought that many may have shared: " How would AFSC recommend that small meetings affect change?

The full responses from each monthly meeting are listed below, edited only to remove greetings and signatures.

Asheville Friends Meeting 4/22/2012

The queries and answers were:

1. What one or two aspects of AFSC programs speak most clearly to your discernment of Quaker witness? Answer: Peace work, Support of Occupy Movement, Economic Justice, and Environmental Justice
2. Is there a particular need or opportunity in your yearly meetings region for work furthering Friends Testimonies – work that Friends in your yearly meeting might support and take on – perhaps with guidance or coordination with AFSC? How are you working on this now? Answer: Immigration - Suggestion was made that we hold a forum and present AFSC and their programs and then ask the questions.

There was also the suggestion that a presentation be made about what AFSC is doing, since some folks seemed unaware. Also, some wanted more time to discuss this (we did it during sandwich Sunday) but our Meeting is rather busy in the next few weeks, so we did it when we could fit it in.

Oxford Friends Meeting 4/22/2012

1) The AFSC queries were read again:

> What one or two aspects of AFSC programs speak most clearly to your discernment of Quaker witness:
>
> Is there a particular need or opportunity in your yearly meeting's region for work furthering Friends' Testimonies, work that Friends in your yearly meeting might support and take on, perhaps with guidance or coordination with AFSC? How are you working on this now?

The AFSC is requesting feedback on these queries.

Friends felt they were not familiar with the current work of AFSC, so were unable to focus on individual issues that AFSC is working on.

Issues that rose that individual Friends were particularly concerned about are:

Economic justice and socioeconomic issues/poverty, secondary to changes in the economic structure of this country; Death penalty; Immigration; Profiling; Prison conditions; Justice system reform; Voter suppression.

Friends were cognizant that we are a very small meeting and do not have one issue that we intend to take action on <u>except</u> for our corporate support of ICM. This is important work for this community, addressing homelessness, poverty and emergency needs. We asked ourselves if there was more we could do or if the AFSC has any current work in this area that might serve as a resource.

How would AFSC recommend that small meetings affect change?

West Knoxville Friends Meeting 5/4/2012

A small group of F/friends met to discuss the AFSC queries at the West Knoxville Friends Meeting House. Since it was such a small group, this discussion does not reflect the spirit of West Knoxville Friends but may be helpful in formulating a response. This is a general summary of the discussion:

1. In general these Friends were impressed with AFSC's work with people rather than with government. AFSC is trusted to use money wisely and work directly with people. It is the only global Quaker outreach organization and a co-sponsor of QUNO. There is concern that the employees are more of a political/activist bent rather than sticking to Quaker/pacifist principles.

2. These Friends feel very cut off from AFSC. We've not had direct contact with AFSC for over five years. They did not see the need for support for the yearly meeting since most Peace and Social concerns committees function at the level of the Monthly Meeting. Some of the issues of most concern: immigration, nuclear arms in our region, environmental witness, are generally handled at the local level. These friends would like to have a direct connection with AFSC.

Celo Friends Meeting 5/7/2012

About ten Friends met after meeting around a table during our weekly potluck. Our discussion was not in the manner of worship sharing but rather in the form of a spirited discussion. One Friend had formerly been in charge of a work camp in Mexico that was under the offices of the AFSC, two others are parents of a current employee of the service committee, two others were former members of different regional boards, all had direct experience with the AFSC. This represents my notes, and were not shared with the

meeting as would be the normal procedure for framing minutes. Note that we are a rural meeting in Southern Appalachia.

There is a need in our region and through out the US for opportunities for Friends of all ages to do service work under Quaker auspices.

Make better use of social media about successful programs

The service committee is too top down-there are excellent workers in the field who do not feel supported by Philadelphia

There is a need in training leadership in community organizations around immigration issues

More needs to be done about providing leadership around immigrant rights for non immigrant citizens-witness for immigrants that are about to be deported

We have very positive feeling about the Peace witness run out of Atlanta by Alice Loveless, Ann Lennon, and Morgan Khamala

Charleston Friends Meeting 5/13/2012
Greenbrier Valley Friends Worship Group

Thirteen Friends from the Charleston Monthly Meeting and Greenbrier Valley Friends Worship Group discussed the queries related to the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) that we received via SAYMA. After a brief discussion of AFSC's history and current program activities, Friends had the following responses to the two queries we considered.

1. AFSC programs and Quaker witness. Many Friends do not know what the AFSC does. Of the programs presented in the current edition of *Quaker Action* (Spring 2012, available during the discussion), several Friends thought several did not represent Quaker witness as they understood it. They were considered "good things," but not rising to the level of "witness." Friends cited examples of Quaker witness such as the caring for victims of war during World War I..

   While praising such historical programs as authentic witness, Friends expressed concern with how AFSC programs get started and get implemented today. There were examples of very small ventures that the AFSC can jump into (such as West Virginia's House that Love Built) that work and allow Friends to witness to Quaker testimonies, but other, longer-standing AFSC programs were characterized as "a closet full of elephants," that were not necessarily connected with Quaker witness.

   One Friend described how she had searched the AFSC website for opportunities for young Friends to be involved in AFSC work, and was surprised to few local programs in which teens could participate. This was in an organization whose roots were in

direct voluntary service. Another Friend asked, "If I wanted to work for the AFSC in Charleston, could I *do* anything?"

2. Needs/opportunities for work furthering Friends testimonies in West Virginia. Friends gave several examples of needs, many of which they'd personally identified and tried to address. Support for hungry neighbors through food pantries, and better nutrition through community gardens were examples.

   One Friend noted the issue of protecting people from ruinous funeral expenses, and described efforts to form a funeral alliance. Another noted that this issue might not seem an AFSC concern at first blush, but might be viewed as a matter of economic justice. So, others observed, might end of life care, in which wealthy people withdraw to protected communities, but there is less support for "aging in place" that is the only choice for most people.

   Environmental stewardship and sustainability are two important concerns in West Virginia, especially with the development of natural gas through hydraulic fracturing.

   International peace efforts/antiwar actions have long involved Friends. We wondered why there was less activity now than in recent years, and Friends expressed appreciation of AFSC's support through Boots on the Ground and the Cost of War display.

   One Friend described recent experience speaking to a high school ROTC group, in which he received a "cool" reception. Support for peace education in schools seems needed. At present, there is statewide concern with bullying in schools; volunteer conflict resolution work in schools might be welcome.

Birmingham Friends Meeting 5/15/2012

1. What one or two aspects of AFSC programs speak most clearly to your discernment of Quaker witness?

Peace and Conflict Resolution

2. Is there a particular need or opportunity in your yearly meeting's region for work furthering Friends' Testimonies – work that Friends in your yearly meeting might support and take on – perhaps with guidance or coordination with AFSC? How are you working on this now.

Schools – There have been an excessive number of macing of students in schools by the Birmingham Police. This is an area that we felt could use some conflict resolution Currently some members/attenders from our Meeting are working with a group called Faith In Action to get this macing stopped.

Immigration – the Alabama immigration law has been a challenge to our Meeting. Rather than having a GBM response we have chosen to join in as individual members/attenders to participate in functions sponsored by the Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice and the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama.

Meditation Programs for Prisoners - one of our attenders who is a reporter for a local TV station reported on a program in a area prison that has a meditation program that has decreased the violence with in the prison. AFSC possibly could help with this by conducting training for setting up and conducting these programs in other prisons. We will be following up on this to determine if this has been or could be expanded to other prisons.

There are a few opportunities to conduct Compassionate Listening sessions such as the one done in Alaska over fishing rights. One would be between police officers who have maced children in schools and the children who have been maced. Another could be between opponents and supporters of the Alabama immigration law.