

New England Yearly Meeting of Friends

The Religious Society of Friends in New England

From the 2007 minutes

Ministry & Counsel Concerns

07–17. Phil Fitz (Nham) presented a report from the Ministry & Counsel working party on FUM personnel policy. He began with a quote from Thomas Merton, talking about God’s choice to become a member of the human race. If only we could see ourselves for who we really are. If only we could see each other that way.

Phil shared a historical summary of NEYM’s relationship with FUM. It was pointed out that affiliation of Yearly Meetings such as Friends United Meeting, Friends General Conference, and Evangelical Friends International, do not hold authority over the constituent Yearly Meetings. Each YM is its own highest level of authority. The FUM personnel policy our working party is concerned with began in 1988, when FUM required its employees and volunteers to either be celibate, or sexually monogamous within the context of a heterosexual marriage.

As some North American Friends began to raise concerns with this policy, and African YM continued to claim their rightful place as full partners on the FUM General Board, different cultural and theological understandings lead some African Friends to preach against homosexuality, as did some other North American Friends. Representatives of NEYM spoke their understanding of the truth to the General Board. This spring, the NEYM M&C and FUM committees sent a strongly worded statement to the FUM board expressing deep concerns about language condemning homosexuality and the use of implicitly violent language in a quote from Romans (1:18-32) used by a local Friends pastor invited to speak to the General Board at their meeting in Kenya in February 2007.

NEYM is not alone in our struggle to discern what God would have us do in laboring with this difficult issue. Other YMs, with a variety of affiliations, are also laboring over this. Ministry & Counsel has proposed continuing discernment on this issue, asking MMs to share concerns with their QMs, which will bring those concerns to YM Sessions.

07–18. Thayer Quoos reported on the activities of the M&C working party on Sexuality and Ethics among NEYM Friends. They have offered workshops and researched available resources. Ministry & Counsel Committee is clear that we need to address education on sexuality and morality. A strongly worded YAF minute 05-13 highlighted the need for a clear articulation of our beliefs and testimonies on spirituality and sexuality. The working party seeks volunteers to form a broad-based group to develop a spiritual sexual testimony.

07–21. Using a live-action “Power Point” presentation provided by Young Friends (which might in the past have been known as a series of tableaux vivant), Lisa Graustein lead us through 350 years of Friends’ History in 25 minutes, helping us understand the multiple, complex, overlapping events that lead us to our current struggle with the FUM Personnel Policy.

Lisa asked us to center in prayer and invite our Quaker ancestors to join us as Friends were divided into small groups to share feelings, issues, goals, and strategies in response to the Personnel Policy.

We gathered again in shared worship, and Friends were invited to speak one sentence, as lead, that was true for their small group.

Friends expressed their deep appreciation for Lisa’s work among us this evening.

07–50. Bill How, clerk of NEYM Ministry & Counsel reported on the discernment of the group of Friends who gathered along with the working party on the FUM Personnel Policy to listen to concerns and see where we might be led as a body. After a period of powerful testimony of hearts and minds changing, of the need to be a loving presence to those with whom we disagree, of the importance of being witnesses for the gay and lesbian children who are in environments where they are not safe to be themselves, of the simple wrongness of speaking to the world about peace if we can’t maintain dialogue within the family of Friends, and of the need to turn passion into action, Friends were clear to approve the following minute:

New England Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends affirms that God loves all God's children equally, regardless of their sexual orientation. We have found this truth confirmed through careful study of scripture and searching for the will of God. We re-affirm our minutes 2004-74 and 2005-60. We prayerfully and respectfully ask that the worldwide community of Friends, in which we are all one with each other in the Spirit, open its heart to this knowing. We commit ourselves to ongoing loving, listening, and mutual prayer and reflection as we continue our valued relationships with each other in God's ministry.

07-51. Bill How went on to present a proposed Minute of Commitment. Concerns were raised that, since NEYM as a body has not yet reached unity on the issue of same gender marriage, the wording in the first point of the proposed Minute of Commitment needs further discernment. We approve asking the group to return tomorrow with a revised version of this minute.

See Minute 60 for the continuation of this business item.

07-67. The Ministry & Counsel working group returned to us with a revised Minute of Commitment. Bill How, Clerk of M&C shared comments from gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer Friends in NEYM who spoke eloquently of their pain. They are not always safe in their Quaker communities. They ask if we can sit in painful places with each other that are still safe. He also reported the strongly expressed desire and belief, on the part of Friends meeting with the working group, that we can find a way to come together. We also heard of our strengths in this YM as a community of Friends working together unconstrained by differences in sexual orientation. Understanding that for some of us, some of the words in the minute are not the way we would write them and taking care to recognize and be tender with the pain on all sides of this issue, we struggled with the deep discomfort some felt with the use of the word homophobia in the revised minute, while others believe that homophobia is among us and must be named. Acknowledging our faith that we have love enough to cover the pain we both inflict and feel we found unity in the body to approve the following minute:

Minute of Commitment

We commit ourselves as individuals and as a yearly meeting to work with one another in witnessing God's movement among us by doing the following:

- Engage in conversation about the deepest meanings of family, marriage and committed relationships and explore what it means to have all of these under the care of meeting.
- Support the work of our M&C working party on Sexuality and Ethics. We need to articulate our sexual ethics and the spirituality of sex.
- Re-distribute NEYM Minute 2005-55, Connecticut Valley Quarter Minute in Support of Same Gender Marriages, and ask MM to season and test this issue and forward the results to their QMs in preparation for bringing them to YM Sessions in 2008 for discernment.

We commit ourselves to undertake this work in love and forbearance, caring tenderly for one another. We acknowledge that there is great pain in our community felt by the people who are affected at the deepest levels of their identity and relationships by the homophobia that exists within New England Yearly Meeting. We also acknowledge the great pain felt by those for whom this issue has challenged their deepest beliefs about marriage and rightly ordered sexual behavior according to their understanding of God's will. We recognize that these actions ask all of us to re-examine our most deeply held beliefs. It is hard for us to challenge each other. We need our behavior and words to be tender as we explore hard topics. We commit ourselves to undertake this work by educating ourselves, by exploring these issues within our monthly and quarterly meetings and by undertaking intervisitation within NEYM. We seek healing, wholeness and God's blessing as we move forward.

07-77. Upon reading back of the minutes from Wednesday evening concerning approval of the Minute of Commitment, two Friends asked to be minuted as being in opposition to the use of the word homophobia. We also heard a concern about use of the phrase, "right ordered sexual behavior," in the same minute number.