

Canadian Yearly Meeting Quaker Education Program Newsletter – November 2013

Visiting Ministries (November 18, 2013, Sue Starr). This morning I had the pleasure of connecting by SKYPE with Friends in Halifax. Elaine Bishop, with her companion, Charlotte Burch, both from Winnipeg MM spent this weekend visiting with Halifax MM Friends. It's my hope that the Visitation Program will continue to grow and contribute to the connection of Friends across Canada.



This newsletter, on the theme of Visiting Ministry, contains contributions from a number of Friends who have had experience with the CYM Visitation Program. It's the final task in my role serving Canadian Yearly Meeting as Quaker Education Program Coordinator, and the SKYPE conversation this morning was a joyful way to begin my last week 'on the job'. I'm grateful that the Education and Outreach Committee (E&O) is currently arranging to contract with Stephanie Deakin on an interim basis to continue the support of this program while longer term arrangements are being made. The fourth Visitors Retreat is planned for the weekend of January 24 – 26, 2014, hosted by Vancouver MM. Deborah Fisch (Friends General Conference) and Stephanie Deakin, (Vancouver Island MM) will be co-facilitating. Marilyn Manzer, Clerk of E&O, will be handling correspondence and questions until a final decision is made regarding the contractor for ongoing support of the program, and Stephanie takes over in the new year. Friends can contact Marilyn for more information at cymqepc@quaker.ca (CYM Quaker Education Program Communications).

On Visitation and Companionship (Stephanie Deakin, Vancouver Island MM)

Over the years, I've done a fair bit of Visiting, traveling in the Ministry myself and also serving as a traveling companion to others. Here's some of what I've learned:

We Friends love to have visitors! From the most isolated Worship Group to the largest Meeting, we feel honoured when a Friend comes to visit. We want to learn from our Visitors, about whatever they have to tell us. What news do you bring? How are f/Friends faring elsewhere? What do we see of ourselves, reflected in the mirror of your fresh eyes?

It's that last piece that I really notice when serving as a companion. I watch Friends interacting and reacting with the Traveling Friend, and what I see underneath the surface is people looking for a reflection. And don't we all do that? Isn't that part of how we define ourselves? We look at

an “outsider” looking at us, to see how she reacts, what he thinks. In having this chance to see ourselves through someone else’s eyes, we learn how much we are like other communities in our family, and how we are unlike. Patterns and behaviours that we no longer notice can be seen fresh in the eyes of a visitor, and we are reminded to examine them, and not simply continue by rote. We love to learn from our visitors, but we also love to see them learn from us, to see the light in someone’s eyes when a new idea, or a new approach, finds a home.

I think the ability to observe well is one of the best gifts a companion can bring. A Friend traveling in the Ministry is often preoccupied by his/her mission. Having someone along who can step back and observe during the visit, and then debrief afterwards, can add a great deal of value to a visit. We can see what parts of a presentation were well received, and which parts perhaps need to be presented differently. We can see, more than someone who is focused on the task at hand, when people are hungry, tired, or restless. We can see what touches and inspires people, and what doesn’t. And we can feed that information back to the Visitor to improve both that visit and subsequent ones.

Being a traveling companion can be about driving the car, reading the map, making sure there are coffee and muffins and flipchart markers... But a companion can also be a valuable spiritual resource and an important learning opportunity, and I strongly believe that any Friend traveling in the Ministry or under a Concern should travel with a companion!

Fall Retreat New Brunswick MM, Goéland Centre, Wellington, PEI October 18-20, 2013 (Ellen Helmuth NBMM)

We gathered amid wonderful fall weather, tall strong trees, and a short walk to the waters of Northumberland Strait. This was a special time for all attendees with our facilitator, Elaine Bishop, and her traveling companion, Charlotte Burch, both of Winnipeg MM

The theme for the weekend was “Listening For the Heartbeat of God”. Elaine shared with us that God continuously invites us into relationship. We spent time building community and reflecting on ways of spiritual listening, through worship, through building skills and abilities for listening.

We were invited to draw a dinner plate and put on it all the things we do in the course of a day. We all say we are much too busy; so we looked at all the businessness on our plates. Elaine then invited us to reflect on which of our activities nurture us spiritually, which ones could we take off our plate, and which ones do we put back on. We were encouraged to listen to our inner critic.

Another exercise in listening gave us all a spiritual quote for which we were invited to write down the essence of what it meant to us. This was then shared in small groups to exercise deep listening, and to focus on understanding through listening.

A walking meditation through the woods gave us prepared minds for an extended time of worship together. This time of worship gave us the opportunity for deepening and grounding our spiritual lives.

An extended session on our Quaker Testimonies was very fruitful. Small groups chose which

Testimony they wished to reflect on, and then shared their insights with the larger group.

Our facilitator was most helpful in keeping us focused on the three aspects of reflective listening: ourselves, to the Spirit within, and with others.

Feedback from a participant:

The individual and group exercises helped to focus my concentration on the retreat topic of developing inner and outward listening as a way to enrich my spiritual journey. Drawing "my plate" really helped me to see (in a very visual form) all the activities I was currently juggling, and it encouraged me to consider ways to adjust my activities to allow time for more spiritual reflection and growth. The extended silence for worship was another activity that I particularly enjoyed. The combination of the wooded surroundings, the circle of F/friends, and the long silence held in common was a powerful and profound experience, unlike any other that I have previously had. At the conclusion of this session, I felt deeply refreshed and renewed, with a heightened awareness of the sounds and sights of Nature surrounding us. During the retreat, I felt that I also had the opportunity to deepen and grow my friendship with other members of NBMM.

Halifax Monthly Meeting Retreat/ Workshop (Sharon Macdonald, Halifax MM)

From November 15 to 17, 2013, Elaine Bishop, travelling Friend, with her companion Charlotte Burch, brought considerable gifts of Quaker experience and knowledge to share with Halifax Monthly Meeting. Attendance ranged from 14-17 at each session, an excellent turnout and all participants were deeply engaged. Grounded in worship, Elaine guided us through discussions on Quaker faith and practice. Through experiential exercises, we were moved and changed by the power of deep listening, had opportunities to think "outside the box" and realize that with creativity and caring, we could enrich our community and become more loving Friends. The value of Elaine's visit is and will continue to be felt. Inspired and invigorated, we have been reminded of the deep bonds we share and wish to build upon.

Thank you, Elaine and Charlotte, and thank you to the Quaker Education Committee for providing this wonderful opportunity for Meetings to receive and send Friends in travelling ministry. We look forward to the possibility of a follow-up visit in the future.

Many thanks also to Sue Starr for her role in facilitating this important visitation program.

Visitors Retreat – Atlantic Region November 8-10th, 2013 (Laureen van Lierop, Halifax MM)

Thirteen Friends gathered under the hospitality of the Fredericton Worship Group at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick.

The facilitators for the workshop were Deborah Fisch and Stephanie Deakin. Deborah travels with a minute from Iowa Yearly Meeting, Conservative, and is the coordinator of the Friends General Conference Travelling Ministries Program. Stephanie Deakin, from Vancouver Island Monthly Meeting, has been serving as companion of CYM's Education and Outreach Committee's Quaker Education Program Coordinator.

"Use what talents you possess; the woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best." Henry van Dyke

We gathered on Friday with a dinner, a Worship and an opening session to find out each other's reasons for attending and our goals for the weekend. We began to discuss 'what is ministry' and 'what is visitation'.

Interesting ongoing discussion centered around 'What does Love ask of us' (what the phrase even means); T-ruth vs t-ruth through continuing revelation and what kinds of opportunities of the spirit can arise through visitation, either to our home meetings or by going on a visitation.

Saturday's sessions were exceedingly interesting and engaging. After beginning with a nice, not short Worship, we dove in. New to me was the idea of "Listening in Tongues" We have heard about speaking in tongues, that is, if we cannot find words to express our spiritual journey, then the language of tongues can take us out of the realm of the verbal and into the realm of speaking spiritually. Just reading the above statement is an exercise in Listening in Tongues in that many of us find this a repulsive idea due to the things we think we know about certain groups who use this as a regular practice. However, we do it every time we engage with each other. When someone uses vocabulary we are uncomfortable with, if we are listening with love, then we translate the words into sounds that we become comfortable with. This is the Listening in Tongues experience. We grant each other the room to speak from the heart without trying to make it palatable to others before we speak, rendering it so neutral as to be lifeless.

That was the first ten minutes.

We discussed the many aspects of ministry, service, risk taking, the willingness to be wrong, intentions of the heart. We discovered that while we all thought we knew what Ministry is, we were all surprised by each other's descriptions. We were reminded that Quakers did away with the Laity, not the Ministry.

In the afternoon, again after a Worship session, we broke into four smaller discussion groups. Each of us sat at the table where the question most interested us. Of course, we all trotted back to the center and shared. Each sharing was followed by Ministry from Deborah and then a group discussion.

Themes kept repeating and resonating: find spirit in our actions; look for the T-ruth (spirit) versus t-ruth (ego led); ministry gives and receives; we are given gifts – they are equal and important; continue to trust each other.

Practical aspects of traveling in Ministry or as a Companion were covered as well as a discussion about receiving visitors in our home meetings. We closed with worship.

Sunday Friends gathered for a deep worship hour and a Go-Round on what each of us had been thinking of but had not been led to share during the hour. Coffee and then my companions and I headed back to Nova Scotia.

I was very glad I attended this workshop. I had had last minute grumpies and almost canceled. I found that I was ministered to very well in my individual concerns. I had very loving conversations with some seasoned Friends and they were true gifts of the spirit. I feel better and refreshed in my spiritual journey with the Beloved Community. As Deborah Fisch said several times, "How cool is that?"

A Gift Given to a Retreat Leader (Elaine Bishop Winnipeg, MM)

One of the gifts that I experienced recently, when asked to lead a retreat, is that of spending time with the chosen theme. I have just returned from a wonderful weekend leading a retreat for New Brunswick Monthly Meeting on beautiful Prince Edward Island. Visiting the Island always is a gift—beautiful leaves, caring hospitality, wind and blowing sand on a beach! As a Quaker Visitor I was offered a further gift of having a supportive Elder of my choice to be my traveling companion. Charlotte Burch of Winnipeg Monthly Meeting filled the bill with grace and good humour! Yet the gift of the preparation perhaps is under appreciated!

New Brunswick Friends asked for a retreat on Spiritual Listening. Their last retreat had a focus on Celtic Spirituality. Memories of my first engagement with Celtic Spirituality on the Isle of Iona (Scotland), during a week with the Iona Community, started my journey with this theme and offered a title: 'The Heartbeat of God'[1]: An invitation to spiritual listening.' The description I developed said:

God continuously invites us into relationship. Spiritual listening is a process through which we can nurture this relationship. We will spend some time meeting as a group building community. Some time will be spent reflecting on ways of spiritual listening, and some time experiencing different ways that spiritual listening can be done. My hope for the weekend is that, through worship, sharing and being together in community, with a bit of play as well, everyone may go home nourished and refreshed.

My re-acquainting myself with Phil Newell's book—Phil had led the week on Iona—reminded me of the congruence between Celtic spirituality and Quakerism:

- The inward or Inner Light with Celtic belief of God within—"the presence of the uncreated within the created"[2]
- As expressed in very early Celtic prayers—ultimately traced back to 6th Century Iona—portraying elements of the Earth as expressions of God's grace, and seeing God in the ordinary and every day rather than the exclusive 'ownership' through the Church
- Seeing in the Gospel of John profound wisdom about God—which in the Celtic mission that emerged from the Synod of Whitby in 646—was perceived as 'listening to the heartbeat of God'. This linked a contemplative tradition back to St. John.[3]

Then off from my bookshelf and into my hands fell a book that had been sent to me for my birthday. It was written by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu—Made for Goodness[4]. As I read it I was moved by the ways in which what they wrote aligned with what I was re-reading about Celtic Spirituality. Despite, or perhaps more profoundly, because of their ministries

—Desmond Tutu and his struggle against apartheid for the liberation of his country and Mpho Tutu who ministers to survivors of domestic violence and to those who have been hurt by apartheid, they write:

- That we, each one of us, is made for goodness! We are temples of the Holy Spirit.
- That despite times we have failed, and done less well than we might, we do not have to prove ourselves to God. God knew us and loved us before we became us!
- That there is evil and the risk of despairing. But although our goodness may become buried this does not change our essential goodness.
- That God calls us to this goodness continually and throughout our lives.

It struck me forcefully how much easier it may be to listen to God, others, ourselves and the world should we completely trust, celebrate and act on this information!

Had I not been asked to prepare on this theme I would not have engaged with these two books. Who knows whether or when I might have taken them up. I was gifted with this synchronicity! For this I am deeply grateful!

[1] Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality by Philip Newell (London: SPCK, 1997)

[2] Ibid, p. 25

[3] Ibid, p. 5

[4] Tutu, Desmond & Tutu, Mpho: Made For Goodness. (London: Rider, 2010).

A Final Note

I echo Elaine's gratitude. Thank you for the opportunity to serve, Friends...until we connect again...Sue
