

A Report on the 2016 FGC Gathering at St. Joseph, MN

By Kirsten Ebsen, Vancouver Monthly Meeting, with thanks to the CYM Education and Outreach Committee for their generous grant enabling me to attend.

The theme for this year's Summer Gathering, **Be humble, Be Faithful, BE BRAVE** was explained by co-clerks, Marybeth Neal and Paul Landskroener from Northern Yearly Meeting, as follows: Faithful and Bold are connected via humility; without humility there is no spirituality.

The Gathering was held at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, MN north of Minneapolis. It was founded in 1857 by three Benedictine Sisters from Bavaria and is today the only all-female college in the US, hosting 2,000 students annually. President Hinton, of African descent, welcomed us, pointing out that the Benedictine Sisters have an historical relationship with Quakers. They share many values with Friends, including our testimonies of peace and unity. Their campus is set on 35 acres of land, which includes a Monastery, 80 acres of woodlands, and more acreage of wetlands and pasture land. We were invited to join them for their early morning vespers which a number of Friends did throughout the week. Douglas Gwyn says that "we can bring other traditions into the meeting conversation...with real benefit. But we need to regain fluency in the prophetic Christian 'first language' of Quaker faith and practice if we are to sustain productive conversation together".¹

White Supremacy was the focus of the Opening Plenary, which stressed the need to move beyond our white supremacist culture (settler culture, as we say in Canada). No one foresaw how timely this was, with the shooting the following morning in Minneapolis, then Dallas ... Though with the best of intentions, North America's Society of Friends continues to reflect a white organization. No one, out of the forty-nine members on the Gathering Planning Committee is of colour. The screaming silence might lead one to conclude that we are racist by the exclusion present in our midst. We must shift into partnership mode in our efforts to build real multi-racial communities and move away from the domination culture that is the status quo, and which continues to be reflected within our Society.

The General Secretary of FGC, Barry Crossno, paid homage to the Dakota Peoples on whose homeland we were gathered. Minnesota was declared a state in 1858 and shortly thereafter the government unleashed a war against its original inhabitants. The Dakota peoples were defeated within six weeks and the ethnic cleansing - as we would name it today - was carried out against men, women, and children, to ensure the state was completely controlled by European Settlers. Barry also shared with us a vision he had while working in Mexico some years ago. He saw large scale violence looming up ahead, and perceived the need for Friends to open our doors to help alleviate the suffering and pain of the victims from this violence. Are we prepared?

¹ A Sustainable Life: Quaker Faith and Practice in the Renewal of Creation, by Douglas Gwyn. A book I found at the Quaker Bookshop at the Gathering.

Rex Ambler presented the Monday evening plenary, speaking to us about *Living in Dark Times*. This talk is available on YouTube and a printed copy will be available at FGC Quaker Books. He broke the internal Quaker meditation process down into three basic steps:

- a) This is our Truth (our testimony as we know it);
- b) Get back to Reality (stop the mental formations leading one astray from oneself), and
- c) Mind the Light.

In order to live our truths we must first get to know ourselves honestly with no more delusions. He handed out some quotations from William Penn, one being; "*But God, having given them insight of themselves, they saw the whole world in the same glass of truth, and sensibly discerned the passions and affections of men, and the rise and tendency of things.*"² Once we've accomplished this, then we can shine a beacon of light into the external world, which is in a state of chaos and bedlam. Without that self-honesty however, we cannot bring true witness into the world. It begins and ends with oneself. This discipline does not mean one agrees with oneself, but one must be still in the Light, which can only be found in stillness. Our Testimonies are not *values* we aspire to, but actually *embodied truths* we must live within ourselves. It takes tremendous spiritual discipline and honesty to accomplish this, both on an individual and group level.

Rex gave an Introduction to the Experiment with Light workshop on Tuesday night as a Special Interest Group, then led us through a three-hour session on Friday afternoon. There were far too many Friends present for the room allotted, and should he visit again the organizers would do well to reserve a room that will hold several hundred Friends. There is such a hunger for his work over here. Meanwhile, an Experiment With Light Network is being established in North America to promote and continue this work.

Thursday's plenary was delivered by Dr. Nekima Levy-Pounds on the subject: *how pursuing justice requires boldness*. She is a professor of law at the University of St Thomas and founding Director of the Community Justice Project, a civil rights legal clinic in Minneapolis. She's a highly recognized and awarded expert on race policy and education, while also providing a voice for the voiceless. Nekima was born into a poor neighbourhood in Jackson, Mississippi. Her family moved to the slums of Los Angeles when she was still a child. Winning a scholarship to an ivy league school in New England transformed her life. She quickly learned that there were alternative ways to settling scores besides gang violence, drugs, robbing and stealing. She went on to become a successful lawyer, then professor of law and social activist.

Nekima said we must move away from complacency and into bold action if we want to confront the injustices in our system. She herself has joined front line activists, using her legal expertise to empower them and confront the powers that be. Recalling the shooting only 36 hours earlier in Minneapolis, she mentioned that a group of protestors were chanting in front of the state governor's mansion as she was speaking to us. Another group were demonstrating in front of the FBI building in Minneapolis wearing t-shirts that read, '*Slavery never ended in America*'.

² The Rise and Progress of the People called Quakers, originally a preface to Fox's *Journal*, 1694.

Of course, she said, things are much better now than they were, but racism is still deeply imbedded and executed in too many of our institutions. So many coloured people have been indoctrinated into a white supremacist ideology that believes white people are superior. She asked the question: How can God work through us to invite us into bold action? Her plenary is available on YouTube.

One Friend in our early morning worship group said that if we really walked our talk, the Gathering would hire several buses so we would be on the front lines beside our brothers and sisters in Minneapolis, wearing t-shirts stating *How Long?* and *No More!* I believed that racism would have lessened with Obama and his family living in the White House, but was told the opposite is true. It has brought it out into the open more. Many are opposed to having a president of colour in office.

Peggy Senger Morrison spoke to us about *Holy Boldness* at Friday night's plenary. She is an author and pastor at her Quaker church in Salem, Oregon, which is strictly Christ centered. Peggy identifies herself as a free-lance provocateur of grace, and loves to travel in ministry by motorcycle, be it on the west-coast of America, or in Central Africa where much of her work is carried out. She made her points with great humour, but there was nothing light about her message. Her website is found at: <http://sillypoorgospel.blogspot.ca>

I held a Special Interest Group on Tuesday night with readings from my play, *The Table* (working title). It takes place between 1658 and 1662, when Catherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers were imprisoned at the Inquisitor's Palace at Malta. I put out a call for both readers and listeners, and about twenty-five Friends came. I nearly cancelled the day before for fear of being a poor guest by presenting a drama about two Friends who had been abused by the Inquisition 355 years earlier. And here we were being hosted by a Catholic Order! I knew I was being led when early the following morning I bumped into the prioress serendipitously. She assured me there would be no harm done because the Catholic Church cannot whitewash its history.

The early morning half-hour Bible study series were lead by Linda Hall from Madison Friends Meeting. It's focus was on the Gathering theme. The readings centered on Miriam, Moses and Jonah. Day four and five focused on Mary Magdalene and Paul. These passages and the study questions can be found on the FGC Newsletter website.

The Early Friends Theology workshop was one out of fifty workshops held for five mornings following Bible study. It touched upon the lives of five Early Friends, all having very distinct voices: Richard Farnsworth - a major leader of the early Children of the Light movement, who has been much neglected historically; Dorothy White; Samuel Fisher - the first university educated Friend who played a huge role in bringing the movement to the continent; Elizabeth Bathurst; and George Keith. Keith was born Scottish Presbyterian, was a close friend of Robert Barclay's, and became a Quaker by conviction in the early 1660s. He was disowned by London Yearly Meeting in 1694 for forming a break-away Quaker group and became an Anglican pastor, highly critical of the Society of Friends for the rest of his life. For all their differences, these Friends remained united in their

rebellion against the oppression and practices of the established Puritan Church of their day, and the belief that God resides within, until George Keith broke away.

Michael Birkell led this workshop. At one point the class discussed personal experiences of mysticism. A couple of Friends shyly admitted they had heard angels sing, which some very weighty Early Friends mention in their writings. And the Single Eye. Several said they had been consciously touched by a Divine presence. But we ended the conversation when it became clear that those who do not share these experiences on a conscious level are left feeling inadequate, as if they don't measure up somehow. No one is greater or lesser for it, and one participant proffered the notion that those who receive conscious visitations do so because they are in need. The fact that we lack a language to talk about this phenomenon further complicates any discussion.

Afternoon sessions were held on non-theistic topics. Many F/friends are having problems with the G-word, which does not mean they are any less spiritual.

Over lunch one day I met Nancy Haines who, along with her husband David, ran the Vintage Quaker Bookstore in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, for twenty-five years. This specialty store offered a feast of 1,500 used, rare and out-of-print books by and about Quakers. In 2013 they sold their shop to family Friend Kristna Evans, who continues to run it in the same way, but has moved its location to Bath, Maine. Kristna also puts out traces for rare books which are hard to find. She is a member of a Intentional Spiritual Quaker Community in Maine. The book store's website is: www.vintagequakerbooks.com
Kristna's email is: books@vintagequakerbooks.com

Nancy Haines held a book launch of her book for Children's MfWfB, *Approved!* This MfWfB was created by her Meeting for 8 to 13 year olds, who demanded it and are now running their own campaigns fundraising for projects of their own choice. Their final decisions are then brought before the larger MfWfB. It has been very empowering for the children to conduct their own business meetings and select their own projects.

Also had an opportunity to speak to Paula Palmer of Boulder Colorado MM. She is working with the support of a Rowntree Charitable Foundation Grant researching Quaker Native Schools in USA. Unlike government schools, these were built on reservations. Children were not forcibly removed from their communities as in Canada. Nor were there any cases of sexual abuse. However, the suffering was as great since they were not allowed to speak their own language and were forced to adopt European ways, counter to their own culture. Education back then was based on a strict punitive method. It's an area American Friends have been silent about. Her report should be published soon.

The Gathering can be overwhelming, as there were so many events and activities on offer throughout the week: yoga, meditation, worship groups, tours discovering the local area by bus, bicycle and on foot, two Art Galleries, an extensive bookshop, book launches, evening contra dances, and full-length films following the plenaries. A special information session was held explaining the history of the Benedictine Nuns in St. Joseph, how they built the local hospital,

designed their own campus, and worked for women's rights. Not to mention how they survived the Depression. To this day, the nuns specialize in world-class embroidery, having brought the craft over from Bavaria. In the afternoons a band and a choral group took turns performing outside the Information Centre. The food was delicious; selections were available for all diets and allergies. A Healing Centre, run by volunteers, offered body treatments and counseling for those in need. I worked two shifts at the Registration Desk, which served as a wonderful ice-breaker and a getting-to-know Friends from elsewhere. It had been six years since my last FGC Gathering.

Nine hundred and ninety-two f/Friends attended this year. Countries represented were: Belize, Canada, Costa Rica, England, Scotland, USA, Zimbabwe, and Germany. Next year the 2017 Gathering will be jointly hosted by CYM and NYYM; the co-clerks at Niagara Falls University will be Katrina McQuail from Canadian YM and Steve Molke from New York YM. It is hoped many Canadian Friends will attend in lieu of our Yearly Meeting which is on sabbatical in 2017, and because it will be so close to our border. I cannot recommend the Gathering highly enough, such great inspiration, learning, and fellowship. Some of the Friendship connections one makes will last a lifetime.

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