

**Letter Series from Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel
of Canadian Yearly Meeting (2017-18)**

#1: Introduction

New Year, 2017

Dear Friends,

Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel (CMM&C) of Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) met in mid-November. Four of our six members were new to the group, so an important part of our meeting was to get to know each other better, as we will be working together over the next year. Much of the meeting, however, was spent in talking about the issues raised by various Friends at our Reporting and Clearness session at Yearly Meeting sessions in August. That was a lively and interesting conversation, and the matters that arose are challenging and certainly worthy of attention.

They include the nature of worship and the discernment of a call to vocal ministry; personal boundaries and how we relate as a community when we come together; the needs of isolated Friends and how we can support these Friends; the nature and responsibilities of membership, and ways we can increase the likelihood that those who join the Religious Society of Friends remain with us; resources for Meetings to help Friends with mental health problems; loss, bereavement, and grief; and a need to have more attention paid to the life of the Spirit in our activities such as Special Interest Groups.

We in Continuing Meeting felt that all these concerns do warrant further attention. We decided to address them one at a time, researching pertinent materials and discerning the ones that best speak to Quakers. We will be letting Meetings and Worship Groups across the country know of our findings in a series of letters, which we will send throughout the year. It's our hope that we can encourage some exchange between worshipping groups across the country. Not only are we often each other's best advisors and counsellors, but such communication will help us all to stay connected and to nurture each other and our blessed community in a year without Yearly Meeting sessions.

Watch for the letters as they are compiled and sent out! If all goes according to plan, you should receive one about every month to two months. We hope that the contact people for all our worshipping groups will be diligent in sharing the results of our work with others. We also intend that the letters will be posted on the CYM website for Friends to access as they wish.

We look forward to learning more about the issues that emerged at CYM and to sharing our knowledge with all of you.

In the Light,

Members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel:

Beverly Shepard, clerk
Charles Brown
Erika Koenig-Sheridan
Jeff Dudiak

Lesley Read
Linda Foy

#2: The life of the Spirit in venues where we are considering social justice issues

This letter is part of a series written by members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel (CMM&C) about concerns raised during our Reporting and Clearness session at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) in 2016.

Dear Friends,

When you gather in your committee meetings or discussion groups to consider social justice issues, are you mindful of inviting God (Spirit, divine Presence) into your midst?

When we gather intentionally, we are often quick to jump into conversation, especially when we're focused on an urgent concern. We are quick to engage when we're at a learning event. On occasion, our enthusiasm may outrun a vital element of our way; that is:

to seek to know an inward stillness, even amid the activities of daily life, so that all may feel the power of God's love drawing us together and leading us. ([Advices and Queries #3](#))

Douglas Steere said,

there is a true sense in which – when we love greatly – this love goes on back of all else that we do. Far from blocking our creative efforts on the immediate tasks before us, this undergirding love may heighten our powers for all that we do.

We cherish our [testimonies](#). We yearn to be faithful to them. Let us not forget, then, the spirit from which the testimonies arise. A gleaning from Canadian *Faith and Practice* states,

There is a need to become the kind of people we claim to be.

And Britain Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice*, section 23.10 notes,

We need both a deeper spirituality and a more outspoken witness. If our spirituality can reach the depths of authentic prayer, our lives will become an authentic witness for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. ... And our response to violence and injustice is to pray more deeply, because only God can show us the way out of the mess that the world is in. And only God gives us the strength to follow that Way.

We remind Friends of the following queries with respect to all aspects of our lives, and in particular, to those times when we gather together to help heal the world.

- **Do you encourage in yourself and in others a habit of dependence on God's guidance for each day, and of God's leadings in your work for peace and justice?**
- **Is your attention to "good works" adequately rooted in the rich, spiritual soil from which the Quaker heritage of compassion, insight, and careful discernment has always grown?**

May our gatherings with attention to peace and justice be true Meetings for Worship.

In the Light,

Members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel:

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Excerpts taken from Advices and Queries numbers 3 and 8; Douglas V. Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer*; Canadian Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*; and Britain Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*

#3: Personal Boundaries

Some thoughts and queries to consider for spring gatherings and anytime Friends gather

This letter is part of a series written by members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel (CMM&C) about concerns raised during our Reporting and Clearness session at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) in 2016. This concern is that of personal boundaries.

The leaders of the children's program at CYM are careful to ensure that the children and youth feel safe and comfortable in all activities. The idea of consent is explained at the start and they understand that it is right to say "no" if they do not like rough-housing or being touched. They also know whom to talk to if they feel someone is not listening.

As adult Friends, we value being part of a caring community, where affection is freely shared. As with the children, we need to be mindful that hugging or physical contact may not be welcome to some, and differences in age or gender may provoke additional anxiety. Yet refusing contact may also feel awkward to some.

Queries

- What measures do we take in our Monthly Meetings and other Quaker gatherings to ensure that our children and youth feel safe and comfortable?
- How can I be sensitive to the other's feelings before making physical contact?
- Can we ensure that there is a "safe person" in each gathering, such as a Listener at Canadian Yearly Meeting or a member of a Meeting's Ministry and Counsel, who is available to talk with someone who might be upset?

In the Light,

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#4: Mental Health

This letter is part of a series written by members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel (CMM&C) about concerns raised during our Reporting and Clearness session at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) in 2016. This concern is that of mental health.

Dear Friends,

We write this letter in the understanding, and send it to you with the reminder, that members of Ministry and Counsel are not necessarily qualified counsellors or otherwise able to offer professional assistance to those experiencing mental health problems or crises. Nevertheless, we offer to Ministry and Counsel (M&C) of our Monthly Meetings some thoughts on how M&C might prepare for this kind of problem and respond to such needs.

First, M&C should clarify to your Monthly Meeting what you can offer. We recommend that you discuss this matter in a general way and be clear yourselves about your resources and skills, and new members should be acquainted with the conclusions M&C have drawn. Include in your discussion the issue of confidentiality, as this can become critical and there are legal responsibilities if someone appears to be in danger of self-harm or harm to others.

We are aware that often members and attenders of Meetings are not really acquainted with M&C, what the group is and can do, so M&C should ensure that this is corrected. It is a good idea to have the names and contact information of M&C members posted or otherwise made known and available for all participants in Meeting. Friends should be made aware of what M&C can offer and perform, as in the previous paragraph.

Most importantly, stable and sympathetic Friends, whether members of M&C or not, can be on the watch for signs of distress – especially among Young Adult Friends, who are in more difficult times and circumstances than their elders were – and can offer listening and resources. As one Young Adult Friend has said, the intentional offer of a listening ear to someone facing difficult challenges can in itself be helpful.

M&C can research the information about online or telephone help for mental distress or crisis and ensure that this is posted in the Meeting House and/or made available to Friends in a newsletter or other vehicle, so that the information is available when it's needed. For instance, in Ontario there is the Mental Health Helpline: mentalhealthhelpline.ca and 1-866-531-2600, and in Alberta the telephone helpline is 1-877-303-2642. In addition, there are local helplines for many cities. M&C should particularly note ways that those in need can access free or affordable counselling.

One or several Friends could take Mental Health First Aid training (mentalhealthfirstaid.ca) and have their names known to other members of the Meeting. Concerned Friends, especially members of M&C, can inform themselves to a considerable extent from this site: www.canada.ca/en/public-health/topics/mental-health-wellness.html.

A Meeting can endeavour to send one or two people to a mental health first aid or similar course or workshop each year, and can be willing to help sponsor a Young Friend in such training if financial support is needed.

M&C can encourage opportunities for Meetings to have spirit-led discussions about mental health and the needs of the Meeting and its members. Such discussions can help to reduce the stigma some feel attaches to such problems.

Mental health issues can arise for people of any age, and we hope that the Meeting communities to which we all feel connected can be sensitive to the possibility of such issues and respond to them with concern and compassion. In our present times, however, society is seeing that young adults may be particularly susceptible to mental health problems, and our Meetings should be watchful for signs of this sort of distress. The kinds of situations that cause young people trouble or trauma include irregular and unstable work hours, lack of economic stability, frequent relocation for work or school, etc. These stresses can produce feelings of social isolation, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other problems. Confusion over sexual orientation and instances of sexual harassment or assault can also arise. Ministry and Counsel should ensure that there is clarity about who is on M&C, what M&C can offer, and matters of confidentiality, as Young Friends often need encouragement when figuring out how to navigate various Quaker processes.

We cannot act as psychiatrists or mental health facilities, but we can provide compassion, listening, and advice on how to obtain practical, professional help. These can be invaluable.

In the Light,

Members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel:

Beverly Shepard, clerk
Charles Brown
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Linda Foy

#5: Isolated Friends within Our Monthly Meetings

This letter is part of a series written by members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel (CMM&C) about concerns raised during our Reporting and Clearness session at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) in 2016.

Dear Friends,

There are a number of isolated Friends within our Yearly Meeting, Friends who live at a considerable distance from the nearest Meeting and can attend only rarely. Isolated Friends used to hold membership through Home Missions and Advancement Committee, but because of the vast distances within CYM and the impossibility of one committee caring for Friends scattered across the country, this is no longer the case. Isolated Friends now hold their membership in the nearest Monthly Meeting, though that Meeting may not be very near. Thus Monthly Meetings now have the care of and responsibility for these Friends.

Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel would like to learn more about how Monthly Meetings care for their isolated Friends, with the intention of sharing good practices with other Meetings. If your Meeting is one of the Monthly Meetings with isolated Friends in your care, we would be interested to know how many isolated Friends are within your Monthly Meeting and what their needs are. We would particularly like to know what your Meeting does for isolated Friends which might be helpful to other Monthly Meetings. Do these Friends call upon you for uplift, counsel, listening, or other support? Do you reach out to them? If so, what form does the reaching out take? How frequently do you reach out to them?

Some isolated Friends are hardly known by their Meeting, and others participate as they can, considering their individual circumstance. Are there ways in which Isolated Friends contribute to or participate in your Meeting?

We ask that you take the time to tell us about the relationships between you and your isolated Friends. CMM&C undertakes to gather and consolidate this important part of the life of Canadian Friends and share with all of us, in time for Canadian Yearly Meeting in August. Please send responses to these important questions to CMM&C Clerk Beverly Shepard (cmmc-clerk@quaker.ca).

In the Light,

Members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel:

Beverly Shepard, clerk
Charles Brown
Erika Koenig-Sheridan
Jeff Dudiak
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Linda Foy

#6: Grief and Loss

This letter is part of a series written by members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel (CMM&C) about concerns raised during our Reporting and Clearness session at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) in 2016. This concern is that of grief and loss.

We have been asked by some Friends what should be done with these letters. As noted in our first letter, “We hope that the contact people for all our worshipping groups will be diligent in sharing the results of our work with others.” For the first of these, ensuring that the letters are forwarded to members of each Meeting’s Ministry and Counsel, if it exists, would be important. The letters could be sent out to the list of members and regular attenders. For Meetings with a bulletin board or the like, the letters could be posted. They could be put into a newsletter. Some of the letters, for instance the one on mental health, have had specific advice about things Meetings and members can do to address the concerns. The issues were raised at Yearly Meeting in 2016, so CMM&C has felt that they are in fact of interest to Friends, and we hope that the letters can be shared with all who are interested in progress.

Dear Friends,

There are many losses that we all experience in life, such as losing jobs, losing friends, losing health, and so on, and these result in various grief responses. Naturally, the most intense loss is the death of a spouse, child, or other close family member.

Dealing with grief is a complex issue with no easy answers. Bereaved people need to know that grief is an individual process, that most reactions to the loss of a loved one are normal, and that this process takes a long time. It must be gone through and expressed. However, hope can be given that life will have meaning again eventually, even if not in the same way as before the loss.

Here are some queries that may help Meetings to provide comfort and support.

- What measures can be put in place right after the death to provide practical assistance, such as providing meals for the family or accommodation for visiting family or friends?
- Do you have one or two people in the Meeting who are very good listeners, i.e. “safe people”? Can they allow the bereaved person to talk freely with complete acceptance?
- Is your Ministry and Counsel familiar with community resources available for grief support, if needed? Many hospitals, hospices, and funeral homes offer such resources. M&C can be prepared with the names of such helpful services closest to Friends in the Meeting.
- When the time is right, is there someone who can help to re-frame the grieving process as an opportunity for growth and for finding meaning?

In addition to the section on Death and Dying (Chapter 5, 5.71-5.85) in *Faith and Practice* and Chapter 12 in *Organization and Procedure*, the following are some resources:

Jan de Hartog. *A View of the Ocean*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007.

Diana Lampen. *Facing Death*. London: Quaker Home Service, 1979.

Hannah Russell. *A Death Chosen, A Life Given*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #432, 2015.

C. S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*. London: Faber & Faber, 1961.

Julia Samuel. *Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving*. New York: Scribner, 2018.

In the Light,

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Beverly Shepard, clerk

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Linda Foy

#7: Prayer in Worship

This letter is part of a series written by members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel (CMM&C) about concerns raised during our Reporting and Clearness session at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) in 2016. This concern is that of the place of petition and prayer in our Meetings for Worship.

Prayer is not often spoken aloud in our Meetings for Worship. We tend to hear the language of prayer as formulaic, lacking in spontaneity, somehow “unquakerly.” Instead we speak of holding a person or a concern “in the Light.”

Yet this beloved Quaker practice is cut from the same cloth as the traditional prayers of petition and intercession. Holding ourselves and others in the Light when we are in extremities – such as a serious illness, relationship break-up, or moral dilemma – is a prayer for healing. And when we encounter a crossroads and don’t know the way forward, we speak of standing still and waiting in the Light for way to open. In other words, we are praying for God’s guidance. When things unravel, we turn to prayer, although we may choose to give it a different name.

Does vocal prayer have a role to play in your Meeting for Worship? Does the language of prayer raise strong feelings, and can you talk about this with one another in a spirit of openness?

Prayer, silent or vocal, is part of many Friends’ individual spiritual practice and inseparable from their experience of worship in Meeting. They describe prayer as “a place which is there all the time and always available,”¹ a mode of being, a practice as natural as breathing. When a vocal prayer ministry is truly spoken “in the Life,” it gathers us and deepens our corporate worship.

What is your understanding and experience of prayer? When you close your eyes and hold a person or a concern in the Light, what do you see or imagine? Do you have any personal experience of prayer or being upheld by the prayer of others?

Friends have found that prayer can take many forms – simple listening, gazing awestruck at the night sky, befriending a stranger, campaigning for peace, planting a garden, having tea with a friend, to name a few.

If the traditional definitions of what constitutes prayer do not speak to you, can you create a different, more expansive approach? Has your Quaker faith and practice helped lead you to a fresh understanding of prayer?

For further reading:

Canadian Yearly Meeting. *Faith and Practice*, 2011.

Friends General Conference. “[Newcomers Cards](#): Quakers and Prayer.” n.d.

Quaker Quest. *Twelve Quakers and Prayer*. Quaker Quest Network, 2015.

Rex Ambler, Alec Davidson, Janet Scott and Michael Wright. *Through Us, Not From Us: Vocal Ministry and Quaker Worship*. The Kindlers, 2015.

John Lampen. *Finding the Words: Quaker Experience and Language*. Stourbridge: The Hope Project, n.d.

Douglas Steere. *Dimensions of Prayer: Cultivating a Relationship with God*. 1962.

¹ Elfrida Vipont Foulds. *The Candle of the Lord*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #248, 1983.

Helen Steven. *No Extraordinary Power: Prayer, Stillness and Activism*. Swarthmore
Lecture, 2005.

In the Light,

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#7: Estranged Friends

Dear Friends,

We have all most likely experienced a situation in our Meetings in which a member or attender who has been coming to Worship regularly stops attending. Usually we wait a few weeks to see whether the person will appear again, and if she or he does not, then we sometimes find ourselves uncertain what to do next. Various Meetings have suggested to members of CMM&C various approaches to next steps.

Contacting the Friend simply to find out whether the person is all right is a caring and wise first step. A member of Ministry and Counsel, the Clerk, or someone in the Meeting who was particularly close to him or her could call. Such a conversation may reveal a reason for nonattendance that will suggest further checking-in, such as an accident or illness. When this is the case, continued care and concern are obviously the way to proceed. On the other hand, the conversation may explain the absence in terms that make further action by the Meeting unnecessary, such as a wish to participate in a different faith group. Something such as a conflicting commitment at the time of Worship might mean occasional contact with the Friend to show that he or she is still thought of and cared about. If the person is a relatively new attender, it may simply be that she or he has decided that the Quaker Way is not the way for her or him.

The difficult situations are those in which the person who has stopped attending has somehow been hurt or alienated by others in the Meeting or by a direction the Meeting as a whole has taken. We have heard a number of examples of this, such as discomfort with God-language or, conversely, with non-theist language; feeling a lack of apparent caring and assistance following an illness or surgery; disapproval of a stance regarding same-sex relationships; or an objection to something presented in First Day School. Each such situation will require careful thought by M&C (or, if there is no M&C, several seasoned Friends). Would the person be receptive to an explanation that various beliefs are accepted in the Religious Society of Friends, his or hers as well as quite different ones? Was the perceived neglect during illness or surgery long enough before that the damage has been done; can it be repaired? Are the differences between the Meeting's position and that of the Friend resolvable, or is it simply appropriate that the Friend should withdraw? Generally, even if the reason for non-attendance cannot be satisfactorily addressed, another contact to acknowledge the situation in some way is recommended.

From the talks we have had with Friends in several Meetings, the best advice would be, first of all, to be aware of each other's situations as much as possible. We are small communities, and it's likely that someone else in the Meeting knows if a particular Friend is feeling ill or lonely or uncertain or alienated. Then, Friends should be encouraged to bring such concerns to M&C or the Clerk. Finally, these situations should be addressed as soon and as compassionately as possible. In cases where, when a Friend has been missing from Meeting for a while, no such problem is discernible, a letter or call may reveal a cause that can be remedied or one that simply explains the absence with no further action required. Let us be guided by love and compassion in these situations as in all our relations with each other.

In the Light,

Members of Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel:

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