

Notes:

Friends and Politics

Western Friend Connect – Workshop Meeting Room – 4/13/2017

Notes by Charlene Weir

Participants:

- Arthur Kegerris – Orange Grove Meeting (Pasadena, CA)
- Barbara Christwitz – Lake County Worship Group (Clearlake, CA)
- Bart Burstein – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Edwin Christwitz – Lake County Worship Group (Clearlake, CA)
- Gary Fryer – Unaffiliated (Santa Rosa, CA)
- Hillary Burwell – Sacramento Meeting (Sacramento, CA)
- Janet Gastil – San Diego Meeting (San Diego, CA)
- Joy Conrad Rice – Vernon Meeting (Vernon, BC)
- Karen Steen – Unaffiliated (Northwest WA)
- Mary Klein – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Talley Kenyon – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Tim Jarvis – Unaffiliated (Rio Grande Valley, TX)

The following notes incorporate ideas shared orally during the online conversation and ideas shared in writing via notes in the “chat box” during the conversation.

Themes in the conversation identified by the note-taker

- We might have been blind to trends that have been developing over many years. We are not listening to everyone, despite saying we respect different views. We need lots of viewpoints to come to truth.
- Quakers are torn between being “political” action versus fighting for primary values. Some believe that the Quaker way is not about being political, especially not in terms of supporting specific politicians or specific parties. Others became Quakers *because* it is a faith that supports political action. There is a tension between taking the side of a candidate or political party and looking at “that of God in everyone.”
- Our political system is corrupt. It is not a representative democracy; it is designed to reflect corporate interests. Only bottom-up action will work. We can focus on Quaker values without focus on specific politicians. There are lots of positive actions to take without supporting politicians and political parties.

Introductions

- People in my meeting are really interested in what is happening in the world and are upset about the recent bombing.
- My heart breaks over the contrived polarization in this country. I had a real blessing to leave in a conservative, rural community, and sympathize with that viewpoint.
- I want to learn how I can best talk with my family members who hold different political views.
- I do a lot of work in politics with the Democratic Party. I would like to see how more Friends could be involved in politics, both within the party system and outside of it.
- I quit my meeting because of political disagreements; I think Friends have a lot to learn about listening to people with different views.
- I find this to be an interesting topic. I try to stay open to all points of view, I but have considered screening out people on Facebook because our views are so different. I want to learn better how to stay open to different opinions.

Discussion of Queries, Part One:

- **Queries:** How has your meeting been affected by changes in national politics and government during the past year? How are relationships among people within your meeting changed? How is the relationship between your meeting and your larger community changed?
- Nothing has changed. We have a perspective that we try to keep politics out of our meeting.
- Because I live so far away, I can't attend, but I try to stay in touch electronically. My meeting could be called the "Political Society of Friends." They are joined at the hip with the Democratic Party. They do not welcome any dissent or differing opinions. I have tried, but I have been unsuccessful at every turn.
- I think we need to learn to listen to both sides. My view is that I am a spiritual being first, and it has to go out from there. My work for social order comes from the Bible; the teachings of Jesus seem to tell me to love my fellow woman or man, and that should happen whether they are Republican or Democrat.
- The two meetings I have attended recently are both very progressive and liberal, but they have no particular party orientation. Despite that, there is an undercurrent of discomfort with political topics in the meeting, a view that "Quakers are not about being political." My view is that Quakers have always advocated for the powerless, which is different than party politics. Basically, Quaker history has to do with values, not politics. Now, essentially everyone in our country feels disempowered. The two parties are really businesses in and of themselves; they are a duopoly. They have divided America and much of the polarity in our country is contrived, caused by the two parties. We need to get back to basic – deal with corruption, with Citizens' United, advocate for the disempowered.

- Our meeting is not divided over this question of whether to “be political,” but we do feel a tension between those who want to act now versus those who want wait until we feel sure we are led by Spirit. We can feel is a lot of energy in “acting,” we can also feel confusion if we keep reacting instead of being proactive. Many in our meeting think that acting in the political sphere is an individual matter, but others think differently.
- Throughout the nation, the group that is growing the fastest is “Independent” voters. In terms of which party Quakers should support, stay with the party that expresses your ideals. Joining a party gives you more influence; you can do more in a group than individually.
- I see the answer is not party affiliation, but rather activism with non-partisan public movements – Move to Amend, Represent.Us, environmental activism, etc.
- The political change that happened this year has been growing for twenty years. Many people in the country have been out; politicians have not been addressing their issues. This has been building, but nobody has been paying attention. How can we make sure that people’s voices are heard? If people don’t have hope that they will be heard, they won’t care.
- I travel to England frequently and talk with family members who are all across the spectrum politically. The support for Brexit in England is very similar to the support for Trump in the U.S. We are not the only country where this struggle is going on.
- Many people believed that Hillary and Obama and the Democrats have done terrible things and that voting for anyone else would be better.
- I heard Michael Moore call the vote for Trump “a Molotov cocktail” – an angry back-against-the-wall vote.

Discussion of Queries, Part Two:

- **Query:** What is the spectrum of views within your meeting about how “real Quakers” should interact with politics and government in the larger community?
- I am active with Friends Committee on National Legislation, but it does trouble me that FCNL relies on an irredeemably corrupt government and political system to solve people’s problems. We don’t have representative democracy in this country because of gerrymandering and corporate influence. I don’t place much hope in relying on Washington, DC. I do feel hope for turning up in mass from the bottom up to wrest control from corporate America. Quaker witness in the world regarding social progress and environment could look like that.
- This two-party system is killing us; it is a divide and conquer pattern. Left-wing, right-wing – same bird. At the same time, Quakers from the top down are leftist, and you can’t bring everybody together if you don’t listen. You can’t start by asking, “What side you are on? Are you for Globalism, or are you for Nationalism?”

- The basic Quaker view is that we respect each other's differences. Supporting political candidates, seeking the approval to specific parties – these have not been part of our history. Historically, we have witnessed One can be politically active without getting into the blue/red issue. Quakers stand for certain values and it is important to stand for those values, whether or not we write letters or stand on the street corner.
- Friends Journal in September 2016 had article by Reverend William Butler of North Carolina who uses analogy of “getting above the snake line” to talk about where we need to move and stand and profess. Justice, preserving the earth, fair treatment of all people, etc. – these are “above the snake line” and these are what we need to stand for and talk about. All are above the political party line.
- During the Vietnam War, it seemed easier for meetings to know what to do – we organized threshing sessions and everyone came to some consensus and could work together. Now, we have small groups working in disparate areas in our meetings; there is no concentrated and coordinated effort.
- I worry that we are naïve, and we are going to be taken over by the bad guys.
- Why is there only “a smattering of activity” today among Friends, as contrasted with the Vietnam era? That’s a conundrum to me.
- My husband said the difference is the draft.
- Tens of thousands of young, mostly white, men were being conscripted and killed in Viet Nam. Now we use drones and mercenaries.
- The draft affected all neighborhoods and towns. This endless war, which underlies much of what has happened in our country for a long time, is onot something most of us as Friends today have directly experienced. So we have been living in our bubbles. Maybe this lack of connection has blinded us to how this endless war has affected many other people in our country, and thus, prevented us from feeling what they have felt.
- Some of our struggle over how to act might stem from the fact that we have not acted publicly for quite some time.
- Our meeting provides a lot of opportunities for Friends to share our political beliefs. However, sometimes we do try to silence certain perspectives. Trump supporters may not feel welcome. We need to consider whether our political behavior is in alignment with our Quaker principles.
- Our meeting has created a Quaker Social Change Ministry group, along the lines recommended by AFSC. This bases social action on spiritual ground. It's very exciting.
- After the election, my meeting invited people to come together to grieve over the outcome of the election, but I wasn't grieving. It was clear that Friends were assumed to vote one certain way. If I can't bring up bad things about Hillary Clinton, then can I really talk about what I think?

- The feeling I have right now is not grief either; it is just plain fear. I agree that it has been brewing for a long time, and that the candidates are a symptom of the problem. However, I get strength from meeting because I *can* include my politics in my spirituality. And I do feel badly about pushing out people who feel differently; I do believe we need lots of viewpoints to come to truth.
- Focusing on particular candidates seems like the opposite of what Quakers do. Focusing on parties and candidates makes it hard to look for “that of God in everyone.”
- I am really finding support from the meeting to be involved with organizations such as ACLU and the Love Army headed by Van Jones.
- A lot of politics is local; and there are many things to do besides lament the current national scene, lots of things to do that are outside of the parties and candidates. For example, the California Senate is promoting a plan that's like “Medicare for All” [SB562]. It's a great example of how California is leading the nation in health care. I urge all my friends to support this bill in any way they can. [See: www.HealthyCaliforniaAct.org]

Afterthoughts by email:

- In Seattle, various religious and community groups are becoming visible in resistance to nasty overtures against ethnic minorities. For instance, one group is printing yard signs in Spanish, Arabic, and English that say, “We don't care where you are from; we are glad you are our neighbors.” People can get these through South Seattle Monthly Meeting. [See: <http://www.southseattlefriends.org/>]
- Susan Strong from Strawberry Creek (Berkeley, CA) founded The Metaphor Project to help people learn to speak in ways that can be understood by others with different political views. [See: <http://metaphorproject.org/getting-heard-beyond-the-choir/>]
- I heard a discussion on NPR recently (April 12, 2017) about using social media to unite (rather than divide) people. To this end, there are two new on-line platforms: “Hi from the Other Side” and “Flip Feed.” The first was developed by a Harvard Business School student and is described as a “political blind date,” where people with opposite political views communicate with the intent of finding common ground. It is designed to allow folks to begin the discussion online and then move to in-person dialogue. “Flip Feed” is currently more like a “lab experiment,” which has as its goal to “use tech to create empathy.”