

AFSC Stands at a Perilous Crossroads

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We write as concerned Quakers and friends of Friends about a dramatic re-engineering of the organizational structure of AFSC proposed by management and Board leadership that will alter the Quaker character of the organization. Despite widespread dissent among staff and governance members, management has continued to push this plan forward. We write this public article because we love AFSC and feel the vocal uneasiness expressed has not been heard inside the organization. We call on other Quakers to call for a cessation of the planned restructure, an external evaluation of the Senior Leadership Team and a searching, well facilitated internal conversation about how this process proceeded so far despite widespread opposition and how the organization can heal and move forward collectively, honoring all voices especially those most impacted by the issues upon which AFSC focuses.

In 2018, the AFSC-organized nonviolent direct action “Love Knows No Borders” was recognized by *The Nation* as the “most important protest” of that year. Hundreds of faith leaders joined a solemn walk across the beach of Border Field State Park to stand in solidarity with migrants coming in large caravans to seek asylum in the United States. The week before, Customs and Border Protection had teargassed mothers and children striving to reach safety, and the Trump administration had escalated child detention and the deportation of migrants.

Confronting Border Patrol agents dressed in riot gear, the faith leaders knelt and prayed for the migrants. Over 30 of them were arrested. This protest was covered in hundreds of news outlets and raised the visibility of draconian immigration policies. The protest and interfaith service held beforehand created a powerful moment of witness. That week there were over sixty echo actions all over the country organized in solidarity by Quaker meetings and local grassroots organizations.

This powerful action was possible because AFSC has been structured to root itself in, and respond meaningfully to, the communities in which we work. The organization’s immigrant rights network, which includes over 70 staff throughout AFSC, including our staff in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and San Diego (CA), offered perspectives “from the ground” about how to respond to the rising outcry of immigrants seeking safety. Knowing the geography and local context of the immigrant rights movement, as well as actual conditions in Tijuana, local staff offered the vision of a solemn walk on the beach by faith leaders, and used their expertise to guide the rising coalition in purposeful action. The Board offered critical support by approving the nonviolent direct action.

For over a century, AFSC has been a public, visible witness of the Quaker peace testimony. The organization fed and protected children during the world wars, stood up against the internment of Japanese Americans, and published Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Letter from*

Birmingham City Jail. AFSC advocates today to eradicate racism and the prison system, and for peaceful solutions that honor the shared well-being of all people.

The distributed power and locally rooted organizational model of AFSC is what made these courageous actions possible. Yet AFSC's current management and Board leadership is pushing the organization instead toward a model of top-down, centrally led initiatives and actions. We believe that such a shift will substantially compromise the integrity and power of AFSC's work. The fuel for our organizing is our relationships on the ground and the autonomous, but deeply connected, work of program staff who know and understand the communities in which they operate.

Today we are at a crossroads. Will AFSC adopt a top-down NGO, grant and donor centered approach, or will it build on a powerful history by committing even more deeply to grassroots, community-led approach that builds strategy and campaigns from the bottom up?

A year ago, with the support of the AFSC corporation (a 100+ member Quaker body formed from and representing Friends throughout AFSC's sphere of influence), the Board approved a strategic plan. The development of this plan cost the organization \$400,000 (excluding hours and hours of staff time), and organized the program work into three thematic areas: Just Peace, Just Economies, and Just Migration.

In the name of strategic plan implementation, the Senior Leadership Team has since proposed a dramatic organizational restructuring that **invests another \$500,000 per year into a commitment to fund six additional middle management positions while adding no resources into the programs on the ground.** It is unclear from where the funding for the new management positions will come.

These funds would be far better spent investing in the critical work staff are doing on the ground. We need investments in current staff, creating pay equity, and providing additional funding for local program and network convening, rather than experimenting with an excessively costly move to hire so many more managers. The proposed restructuring will not help AFSC live into its strategic plan or its deeply held values.

The process followed by the Board and leadership team has actively minimized the voices of the communities affected by the themes the strategic plan purports to address, a profoundly troubling development for an organization which has for so long relied on a sense of unity and collaboration. The Board is guided by a Board seasoning policy, which describes the way the organization operates from Quaker principles. That policy says, "In order to make good decisions, AFSC governance bodies and staff need to be sensitive to the experiences and perspectives of the broad variety of stakeholders within and outside of the AFSC family. These stakeholders include Quakers, donors, and partners with whom we work in communities or coalitions."

Though there have been "listening sessions," the widespread dissent expressed by staff and stakeholders regarding restructuring has not been answered in any substantive way, and even after the Board agreed to a "co-design" process the representatives of program staff have been viewed as consulting on the process, rather than as co-creators of a path forward. Consistently the senior leadership has insisted that the creation of this new layer of

managers is essential without answering questions about what problem this unit is intended to solve. Only now, after requesting to be included in the process in April, has the clerk invited the Corporation to fill out a survey that assumes restructuring is necessary, rather than bringing the Corporation into the conversation and deliberations about restructuring writ large.

AFSC's magic, what makes us unique, arises from how our programs develop locally and are often led by those directly impacted by the issues we work on. Locally focused and accountable programs that cooperate with each other across regions and continents create transformative work. This orientation helps AFSC develop intersectional approaches that function not only across international and U.S. regions (the organization's Palestine-Israel joint work is an excellent example) but also across issues (the recent Free Them All campaign and the We Are Not At Risk youth network campaign are salient examples).

AFSC's legitimacy in a world of top-down NGOs arises from its accountability and connectedness to communities. This is also part of what makes AFSC a Quaker organization: Quaker authority rises from individuals and local communities/meetings ("ganglia" as Rufus Jones called them) which then come together in yearly meetings and other configurations to build power together, rather than asserting power from above. This structure is intentionally designed to devolve power to the base. At AFSC we want power to be held by communities and in programs. These are the people in the best position to determine what AFSC can distinctly offer in any given context. AFSC's executive committees and regional administrative structure protect our community connections, while also holding the organization accountable to and in relationship to Quakers, who often connect with AFSC most deeply in service on these committees. This proposal, if it proceeds, will systematically dismantle the locally focused and accountable way AFSC has worked.

As part of the restructuring process a consultant was hired (at a cost of \$60,000) to listen to AFSC constituencies about the best structure to implement the strategic plan. But the leadership team threw out the recommendations of the consultant's report, many of which proposed enhancing accountability to the communities in which AFSC works. Management instead put forward a new proposal to drastically re-engineer the organization and create many new management-level positions (paid at rates much higher than program staff). Serious harm, abuse of power, and violations of Quaker principles in the relationship between the management team, staff, and volunteers have been documented and reported in the Inclusive Cohesive and Just Task Team report, which included as a central recommendation the halting of the restructure process. There is almost universal opposition to the restructuring proposal from staff and executive committees.

A group of over 50 concerned individuals calling themselves the People's AFSC released a survey to canvas opinion on the restructuring proposals from AFSC management. Of 140 staff and governance members who responded, 76% were opposed to the proposed restructure. Eighty-five percent of staff expressed "no confidence" in management. But the people at the top of the organization -- the General Secretary, the Deputy General Secretary, the Assistant General Secretary for Advancement, others on the Senior Leadership Team, as well as the clerk of the Board and several other Board members -- continue to insist that this way forward is the only way to implement the strategic plan despite no Board approval

of this proposal. In meetings with program staff representatives convening in a co-design process, and with advice from the Board to consider many possible restructure options, the General Secretary continues to insist in communication to the union joint council that this new layer of management positions is “non-negotiable.” When asked about this statement and the team working to consider together a US structure, the General Secretary sent a memo stating, “The Leadership Team has tried to clearly articulate that while this may be a “Co-Design” process, it is not a “Co-Decision” process.”

AFSC stands to lose what makes it distinct, the Quaker character that makes the work both unique and effective. Several staff have left or are on the verge of leaving the organization--some of whom have been with AFSC for decades--due to the difficult experience of these processes and their concern about the new direction AFSC seems poised to take. We risk losing vital expertise held by some of the most principled, accomplished and wise organizers and activists working today.

We write as concerned Quakers and friends of Friends, and invite other Quakers to write to the Board and insist that this restructuring process be halted and re-examined. We ask that the current management undergo an external evaluation and that the organization as a whole recenter in its distinctive Quaker principles and the understanding of the light of the divine in each person. We call on our beloved AFSC to undergo a thorough and searching reflection and examination of how this push toward centralized power got so far in spite of so many strong concerns raised along the way. A deep and honest conversation, facilitated by a skilled outside Quaker consultant between the Board, AFSC staff, and others, is necessary to determine a way forward that interrupts the patterns in the organization which have caused such deep harm.

Among Friends, when there is substantive conflict in a decision-making process, the response is not to push through and minimize the conflict, which seems to be what management is attempting to do. We stop. We step back, we make space, and we listen for collective guidance--even when it means delaying an important project. And we listen with love and respect for as long as it takes to achieve unity.

AFSC is a vibrant witness arising from Quaker faith and practice. With this article and the voices of others who may join us, we seek to obstruct a vision of the few that would dismantle the core of the organization, and support instead the prophetic vision of the organization held by the many.

For the more than one hundred years that the AFSC has existed, its inclusion of those most impacted by oppression has proven that great work can be accomplished by people of faith and conscience working together as equals. In our view, this is the only way forward if we are to achieve authentic equity and justice in our increasingly polarized and troubled world.

If you feel moved to write to AFSC staff and governance leaders, here are some questions you may wish to raise up, as we are doing:

- What is the problem this restructuring effort is attempting to solve? Why the proposal for a top-heavy structure? Is this a colonial structure?

- Where is the space in this new structure for the leadership of affected communities? Where is there room for Spirit to speak through oppressed communities?
- In a time of social and environmental upheaval, we face a future of increased immigration and internal displacement. How will a move away from community-led organization help AFSC be responsive to its partners?
- How will the need to fund these new management positions affect programmatic funding? Will one be funded at the expense of the other?

* Though Lucy writes from her position in the organization, she wants to be clear that joining in co-authoring this message is an act of conscience, and she does not speak on behalf of the Friends Relations committee or AFSC the organization.