

## Minute 2021-35 NEYM's History with Friends United Meeting

The Clerk called on Frederick Martin (Beacon Hill), one of our representatives to the FUM General Board, to introduce the issues surrounding the relationship between NEYM and FUM. The text of his remarks follows.

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FUM is an international association of Quaker yearly meetings that represents one "branch" or "flavor" of the Quaker faith. The various branches of Friends all grew out of the core revolutionary Quaker movement that started in England in the 1650s, but in 19th-century England and America, religious changes swept through the whole culture—not just Quakers—and Quakers split into four or five different branches. One of these branches was more activist, more involved in abolitionist work and social reform, more Bible-oriented, and began holding programmed worship services and supporting pastors. New England Quakers were almost all part of this branch.

In 1902, this branch organized itself into what they called the Five Years Meeting, which later became Friends United Meeting. New England Yearly Meeting was a founding member. They were trying to strengthen a kind of mainline Protestant theology against the growing evangelical revivalist movements that were sweeping Quakerism along with the rest of the country.

New England Quakers, even in the early 20th century, were not part of the more liberal Friends General Conference. Only in the 1940s did some newly independent meetings in places like Cambridge, Providence, and Hartford start working with FGC.

Another element, separate from FUM, was a missionary effort of Quakers from the United States to East Africa. In 1902, NEYM sent two representatives to the Board that organized this effort separately from FUM. It was taken under the care of FUM a couple of decades later. Kenya now has the largest number of Quakers anywhere in the world, and they are members of FUM. The Board and staff have been working to decolonize the organizational structures of FUM for a number of years, but that's another story.

Today, FUM is an association of 37 yearly meetings, 20 of them in Kenya. Four or five FUM-affiliated yearly meetings in the United States are also affiliated with Friends General Conference, including us. The umbrella of FUM's organizational structure includes Friends Theological College in Kenya, several other programs in East Africa that support Friends, Ramallah Friends School in Palestine, and the Belize Friends School, programming for Friends in North America, and an international conference every three years called the Triennial.

Like any nonprofit organization, FUM has a personnel policy. Most of it is about ordinary things like staff benefits, but it includes what is called a Personal Ethics section, which

says that staff are expected to lead lifestyles in accordance with Friends testimonies. Susan Furry, a New England Friend who wore a pink triangle to FUM gatherings in the 1970s, has described the “long-standing but unwritten and unspoken policy: no Gay Friends could work for FUM.” An incident in the 1980s caused a firestorm of protest when a gay Friend applied for a position and was rejected. This prompted the Board to adopt the current policy in 1988.

I know this is painful, because it's the policy that New England is demanding change. I'm going to read the part that matters here:

Staff and volunteer appointments and promotions are made without regard to sex, race, national origin, age, physical disability, or sexual orientation. It is expected, however, that intimate sexual behavior should be confined to a traditional marriage, understood to be between one man and one woman.

Susan Furry points out that this policy “did have the advantage that (though discriminatory) it would actually be possible for a Gay or Bisexual Friend to serve in Friends United Meeting.” She goes on to say, “I did not feel the policy was the will of God. I strongly believed and still believe that it was and still is God's will that the policy must ultimately change. But I knew clearly that this was the best that this particular group of Friends could do at that time.” She also asked us to bear in mind that in 1988 only six of the monthly meetings in NEYM had approved same sex marriage, most of them just year, one in 1987, and one in 1986. One other note: part of the intent of the policy was to promote gender equality in Africa by restricting patriarchal leadership by men with multiple wives.

New England representatives to FUM hoped this personnel policy would be the start of incremental change, but unfortunately it became frozen in time while our country has only grown more polarized.

Twenty-four years later, in 2012, the personnel policy had to be updated for legal reasons in the state of Indiana. When it came to the section on Personal Ethics, a number of representatives, including those from NEYM, were not in unity with it. Unfortunately, when there was no agreement on a new policy, the usual Quaker practice left the existing one in place. A note was included in the new personnel manual that the Board is not in unity with that section of the policy.

So from a factual standpoint, this is where we still are.

Because FUM is governed by a Board made up of yearly meeting representatives which worked by Quaker process, change can be held up even when the ground has been shifting for FUM's member yearly meetings in North America.

Out of eleven FUM yearly meetings in the U.S. in 2009, only four were LGBTQ-affirming. Since then, two yearly meetings have split, with one side affirming and one side non-affirming in each case, and four more have either adopted affirming policies or been open to their monthly meetings doing so. This prompted many anti-affirming meetings to leave. So, the U.S. yearly meetings in FUM overall have become more affirming.

While concerns about the policy had been voiced earlier within New England Yearly Meeting, the issue came to the fore in Sessions 2009 when it was clear that some Friends felt we should disaffiliate, while others felt we should stay in relationship. A few of them felt that they could not allow any portion of their money to go to FUM—even through their donations to their monthly meetings, which in turn donated to NEYM, which donated to FUM.

The withholding mechanism was established as a sort of 11th-hour way to move forward. It let us stay in relationship while allowing those whose conscience would not let them donate to FUM remain in relationship with their monthly meeting and NEYM. Some members of Wellesley meeting resigned as they felt that even this measure was not enough.

Yet despite multiple commitments to engage with everyone and seek a better way forward and multiple renewals of the withholding plan, as a body of Friends we've mostly avoided deep engagement. Some Friends have engaged in intervisitation with yearly meetings and are convinced that, while slower than we could wish for, one-on-one relationships built over time are the way we change people's hearts.

At Sessions in 2019 we considered the withholding policy again after a five-year hiatus, and the clerk's sense of the meeting was that we did not have unity to continue the withholding plan. It had been written with a sunset clause, so without unity to reaffirm it, the mechanism ceased to exist. It was allowed to extend to October 2020 to allow monthly meetings to take this into account in their budgets. Then the COVID pandemic came. The Clerks' Table saw that we couldn't discern this at our first Zoom Sessions, and Permanent Board authorized a further one-year extension to October 2021.