

## **Report on Friends General Conference (FGC) 2023**

From Carolyn Hilles-Pilant (FMC), member of Central and Executive Committees

I'm not going to try to sum up the full range of work of Friends General Conference or its internal issues and administrative structural complexities, some of which are under review and revision. This report will focus on aspects of FGC's work that may have particular interest to Friends in New England Yearly Meeting.

### **The Gathering** (*a version of this section was included in the Advanced Documents*)

By the time Sessions meets in August, 2023, the first in-person FGC Gathering in three years will have been held at Western Oregon University in Monmouth, OR (July 2-8). This Gathering offered an unusual opportunity for involving other branches of Friends in its planning. Barclay Press operated the bookstore. Local Evangelical meetings and non-affiliated Pacific Yearly Meeting were involved in the Gathering planning. Later reports will summarize this event and what the organization learns from it for planning of future Gatherings.

The organization is balancing the needs of many constituents in its Gathering planning and experimenting with new forms, including Young Adult and Youth (YAY) Gatherings in alternate years and hybrid multigenerational events.

FGC is excited to announce that the 2024 Gathering will be held in person and virtually at Haverford College June 30-July 6, with additional dormitory space available at nearby Bryn Mawr College. The Gathering has not been held in the Northeast since 2014 and it is likely to be a long time till it is in this region again. The greatest concentration of FGC Quakers is in the Northeast and it is hoped that the attendance numbers will return to pre-pandemic scale. FGC will examine and revise its Covid protocols as appropriate in advance of registration. I hope that we will have a strong showing of NEYM Friends, including first-time attenders who have not had the opportunity to be part of a Gathering within driving distance. Please promote this event in your meetings, and plan to come for a week of worship, workshops, singing and fellowship among Friends.

Looking further out, the Gathering in 2025 will be an in-person YAY event with a virtual program for other attenders. The 2026 Gathering will be in person.

### **PROGRAMS (a selection):**

#### **Quaker Cloud (program closing):**

The laying down of FGC's meeting website program, Quaker Cloud, has impacted some New England meetings. In order to help with meetings' transition to other platforms, FGC formed a community of practice to help Friends share ideas about the transition. The Communications Director devoted much time to this project. Fifty attended the first program and forty the next. FGC has distributed a WordPress template for meetings that want to use it.

#### **Selected from the Nurturing Ministries Programs:**

*(under care of CNM—Committee for Nurturing Ministries)*

- **Ministry on Racism (MoR):** As a result of the Gathering Together Campaign, FGC has increased staffing for this work, which includes regular Zoom gatherings for Friends of Color for both worship and fellowship and hybrid retreats for Friends of Color. The location for the in-person portion moves around the country to allow individuals to have an in-person opportunity closer to their homes. The program has offered Zoom gatherings for youth of Color with the youth participating in

the planning. Pre-Gathering Retreats for Friends of Color have carried on through the pandemic and are now hybrid. The white Friends confronting racism has increased the worship for Friends to include Thursday evening for East and Midwest Friends. MoR continues to provide a connection with the White Privilege Conference and Friends get a reduced rate for registration. MoR also worked with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Pendle Hill, and Friends Council on Education (FCE) to put together the Quaker Coalition for Uprooting Racism (QCUR), which held a year-long training which ended this past March. There are plans for another group to go through this training if grant funds allow. The original team has had the addition of Friends Committee for National Legislation (FCNL) and Quaker Voluntary Service (QVS) as partners in this work.

- ***Spiritual Deepening:*** This program has a library available for all to use. They offer retreats and virtual workshops. In 2024, FGC will offer a virtual Spiritual Retreat over a 3-4 day period; a working group is assisting with this work. The working group's primary role is to guide the planning and implementation for the Gathering Anew Spiritual Retreat.
- ***Youth Ministries:*** Youth Ministries has also added a full-time staff person thanks to funds from the Gathering Together Campaign. This program is responsible for the youth programming at the Gathering and for Young Adult Friends events throughout the year, as well as a mentorship program designed to mentor high school and Young Adult Friends in Quaker process and spirituality. Some of the mentors are high school and Young Adult Friends.
- ***Clerks Training:*** For many years under a variety of committees and now under CNM there has been a clerks' training for high school and Adult Young Friends gathering clerks. Last year it was expanded to include clerks of yearly meeting high school and Adult Young Friends programs.

### **Publications:**

The Publications & Distribution Committee has sought feedback from constituent meetings about what they need. The general need is for specifically Quaker materials such as newcomer pamphlets and welcoming cards. The Committee will discern whether these materials will need revision in light of the anti-racism query that guides FGC process ("*How does this decision support FGC in its goal to transform into an actively anti-racist faith community?*") New large-print hymnals will meet the demands of Friends with aging eyes. Anti-racist mainstays such as *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship* and *Black Fire* will get continued support; works on general spirituality won't.

### **The Gathering Together Campaign, Development and Finances:** (good & bad news)

The Gathering Together Campaign has raised nearly \$1.9 million in cash and pledges, raising the confidence of staff and the clerks that FGC can attain what was once seen as an ambitious end goal of \$2.4 million. The Committee is moving into a more public-facing phase of the campaign. The Annual Fund is also on track this year. The Development Committee is recommending a 5% increase in the fundraising goal for next year. Development staff are looking forward to more in-person conversations with donors as the Covid precautions ease.

That's the good news about FGC finances. However,

Some of the campaign money has already been spent on staffing current needs. Expenses (almost all for staff salaries and benefits) will exceed revenues by at least \$250,000 this year and FY 2024, which will necessarily draw down the investment reserves beyond the recommended 5% invested for covering current operations. The unknowns in this projection include the financial outcomes of the Gathering in 2023 and 2024. If attendance is lower than hoped or expected, annual deficits will be higher. The Committee's financial advisors note that the extraordinary market gains of the recent past are not likely to be available for the foreseeable future.

Finance Committee is clear about their concern that this is an unsustainable situation, which arises in large part from the Central Committee's establishment of a greater number of worthwhile programs than annual revenues can support. Reducing or hibernating some programs will be necessary, as will be increasing revenues. The Finance Committee is asking Central Committee to re-examine FGC Goals and priorities for the next five years to examine what goals can be relaxed to lessen financial burdens. Annual giving donors will be asked to consider inflation as they plan their giving. The Finance Committee is asking that the Central Committee be more active in fundraising; last year only 53% of CC members donated to FGC. A prevailing Quaker culture of sensitivity to being asked for money, or for some Friends even discussing money, is seen as one significant barrier. (I see it as like the weather—everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it.) Finally, concerning Gathering planning: The Finance Committee suggests that all the Gathering events be budgeted to break even. They ask if more wealthy participants can pay enough to help support those with leaner means, including youth and young adult participants.

### **Broadly Shared Challenges:**

Executive Director Barry Crossno attended the leadership conference at Earlham College, and reports learning there that many concerns of FGC are shared widely among Friends. It is harder to recruit volunteers than in the past, harder to keep young Friends involved. Moving to videoconferencing has been essential but much richness of connection has been lost. For an organization such as FGC, with a large geographical base, the possibility of reviving in-person meetings is especially challenging. Presiding Clerk Marvin Barnes floated the idea to the Executive Committee of at least one in-person, no-hybrid option meeting per year and received immediate pushback from Friends with health and family issues. Others cited environmental concerns and reminded those present that not all yearly meetings give financial support to cover attendance at FGC meetings. It seems there is no going back and we must learn to move forward together.

I am personally concerned that New England Yearly Meeting has not kept a strong corporate connection with Friends General Conference for some time. I wish for more Friends to serve on the FGC Committee of the Yearly Meeting. I am presently the only member of my yearly meeting on Central Committee, though a few other New England Friends are involved in the FGC committee structure.

### **Outreach—sharing the Quaker message of transformation:**

Outreach is always an FGC concern. The organization has experimented with online ads, with some success. Some feel that *Friends Journal* is doing the job of outreach for FGC Friends. Barry Crossno often speaks to the fact that organized religion is shrinking in our society but spirituality is not, and many people who are leaving the religious faith they grew up in feel a gap between mainline religious beliefs and values such as inclusivity that are important to them. These align well with liberal Quakerism. Barry reminds us that as valuable as ads, articles and QuakerSpeak videos are, there is no replacement for our direct human connection with others. He asks, do we believe there is something valuable in Quakerism that we want to share? Can we communicate the power of transformed lives?