

IYM Religious Education Report (2007-2008)

Illinois Yearly Meeting's (IYM) Religious Education Committee met in early March and shared the findings of the survey which we recently conducted with 18 of the 21 monthly meetings and worship groups within IYM. The purpose of the survey was to learn more about each other and how we approach religious education in each of our communities

We asked Friends about their needs. The feedback we received was a strong desire for more members and more children in our communities. However, outreach is notably absent. We learned that the most important way to encourage families with children to join us is to be ready for them. Having an established program for First Day School shows children are wanted and valued. When families with children visit meetings and there is no First Day School program in place it is unlikely they will return. Families need the support of others to participate fully in the life of the meeting. In particular, newcomers to the Religious Society of Friends need a way to learn about us.

We heard concerns about "being too small" to offer First Day School. Perhaps if we view our small size as an opportunity for growth, we will see that making way for children to be with us will enable our communities to become more vital. This is the simplest form of outreach- being ready for newcomers who find us on their spiritual journey. We want to assist meetings to make it possible to see beyond their size. I will say a bit more about that at the end of this letter.

What follows is a summary of the main findings of our survey:

1. Meetings who make children a priority have a strong influence on attendance by families. These are the statistics about IYM. Please take in these numbers:
 - a. 8 meetings who have regular attendance of 20 or more adults provide regular and frequent First Day School.
 - b. 6 smaller meetings (with fewer than 20 adults) also provide regular and frequent First Day School.
 - c. 7 small meetings have no regular program for children.
2. Successful First Day School programs involve planning ahead. Some meetings plan several months in advance and others plan for the year. Overarching themes or subject areas guide the lessons.
3. 'Tweens (11-14 year-olds) and teens stay involved in First Day School and meeting when they are involved with plays and (service) projects. It is important for this age group to feel integrated into the community and embraced as vital members.
4. Successful preparation of First Day School teachers requires good mentoring. Supporting a new teacher by modeling teaching and/or by staying with them for the first lesson(s) improves comfort and confidence with the children.
5. Recruitment of teachers is a perennial challenge for Friends. Typically, parents have to "beg" for help. If we are to keep children in our meetings we need to support the parents by recruiting teachers for them and also by volunteering to be teachers ourselves. Teaching for 2 weeks at a time works well and overlap of teachers by one week is ideal for many meetings. Having 2 teachers in First Day School addresses the concern about sexual abuse of children.
6. Barrier for First Day School are as follows:
 - a. Having no First Day School program is the greatest barrier to having children in our meetings.
 - b. Religious baggage among the adults prevents our children from learning about the roots of our Faith, in particular as it relates to Christianity.

- c. "Anti-religious" sentiments in some meetings makes it uncomfortable for Friends to minister to each other, which affects how well we teach.
 - d. Lack of outreach reinforces the notion that there is no need for a First Day School program. There are no children because meetings are not growing.
7. Needs:
- a. More members
 - b. More children

All the meetings we met with shared a similar message- the desire for growth. Religious education is one avenue of learning and growing together. Outreach is made more difficult and uncomfortable when Friends have not practiced talking to each other about who we are and about our historical roots. In addition, religious education is an essential part of helping newcomers find their way in our Religious Society. This summer at annual sessions we have arranged for Johanna Anderson from FGC's Religious Education Committee to lead a workshop on Friday and on Saturday about outreach, to address this expressed need.

Religious Education Committee members are concerned about how monthly meetings work together. We are all a part of our yearly meeting, yet many of us are very isolated and are not involved with IYM. We heard Friends say they were stretched too thin in their monthly meetings "to give any more to IYM." Part of the purpose of IYM is to serve monthly meetings. By giving to IYM, we give to ourselves and to each other. This is what makes us a Religious *Society*. We want to support meetings to be stronger by facilitating ways of helping each other, despite our distance from each other.

To this end, we are making a few changes in our role as committee members. Each monthly meeting and worship group now has a liaison from our committee to work with you and help facilitate whatever needs you have. If Friends do not know who their liaison is, please contact me by phone at (309) 734-7759 or by email at enarkiewicz@yahoo.com.

We will soon be "unveiling" a Yahoo Group for members of IYM who wish to join it. The focus will be on religious education and it will be a forum for sharing ideas, asking questions, and supporting each other. We will also post Quaker plays, book reviews, lesson plans which Friends have created, and other ideas as they develop. In addition, you will be able to see what books exist in the IYM Traveling library and find out how to check them out. We will announce it on the IYM listserve as soon as the Yahoo Group is ready for use. We are excited about working together more as a yearly meeting. We recognize that we are all part of the same spiritual community, yet separated by physical distance. This is an effort to close that gap. Please join us.

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