

Meeting of FWCC Section of the Americas  
March 19-22, 2009

The Annual Meeting of the Section of the Americas of Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) was held in Canby, Oregon this year. Local Friends hosted the event very ably at Canby Grove, a delightful religious conference center a few miles from Portland. Almost 200 Friends met for worship, discernment, and fellowship over the course of the four days of the annual meeting. Lodging options, meeting rooms, and other facilities were excellent. So was the food, which was regarded by most (me included) as superior to that at any such gathering in recent memory.

Each morning began with a worship service in the manner of Friends. Given the diversity of the meetings and churches represented at the gathering, it was fully appropriate that one of those services was programmed, one unprogrammed, and the third semi-programmed. All of the services set the tone for the worshipful series of meetings and other events that took place during our time together.

Worship Sharing is an important daily feature of all FWCC gatherings, and this one was no exception. Prearranged groups of about a dozen Friends each met for 60-80 minutes each day to discuss queries based on the theme of the gathering, "There is still a vision for the appointed time," from Habakkuk 2:3. In this short book of the Bible, the prophet Habakkuk tells God of his disappointment with the state of the world, to which God responds that the divine vision endures and will be revealed in due time. We were challenged in our worship-sharing sessions to consider whether the diversity of Friends is capable of uniting on a shared vision, surely a serious concern for FWCC given its mission "to express our common heritage and our Quaker message to the world."

The theme from Habakkuk was directly taken up in a splendid keynote address by Jan Wood of Northwest Yearly Meeting. After noting how closely Habakkuk's general description of the state of the world in his time reflects our own situation today, she went on to express hope and confidence that some of the responses that God makes in that book of the Bible also fits what we are currently witnessing. She then presented an outline of what the Religious Society of Friends will need to do in order to play its part in achieving unity of vision without sacrificing diversity, including ways of healing longstanding pains from the differences that have emerged amongst Friends over the course of history. In her view, FWCC is very well positioned to take the lead in this process. Her address spoke directly to our condition. I spoke with a number of Friends about it afterward, and every one of them had unqualified praise for it. The same theme was also taken up the following evening in a panel discussion between Quaker leaders from various traditions in the Northwest USA, with similarly inspiring results.

This year's business sessions were ably clerked by the new Clerk of the Section of the Americas, Ray Treadway, a member of North Carolina Friends Meeting (Conservative) and longtime FWCC stalwart. The main item of business, as usual, was management of the section's dwindling finances, which is of particular concern in the current economic climate. Two of the Section's staff members have been released from

service this year, in addition to the two who were released at this time last year, and other budget cuts were proposed and approved at the annual meeting in order to reduce the current deficit. Several staff and committee members observed that this situation represents an opportunity for us to be more faithful in discerning the work that FWCC is called to do in order to fulfill its ministry. Consistent with this focus was the decision of the assembled body to reduce the number of standing committees from 14 to 6, with the remaining work either to be handled in other ways or to be laid down as a direct concern of FWCC.

This year's gathering was an opportunity for the members of FWCC's Central Executive Committee to meet, which gave us Americans the chance to meet committed Friends from all over the world. These included Duduzile Mtshazo from South Africa, Clerk of FWCC; both fulltime staff members from the FWCC World Office in London, Nancy Irving and Harry Albright; the General Secretaries from each of the 4 sections of FWCC (Africa, the Americas, Asia-West Pacific, and Europe & Middle East); and several other Friends from various parts of the Eastern Hemisphere. Their presence was especially appreciated given the disappointingly low number of Latin American Friends who were able to attend this year's annual meeting. It was hoped that this would to some extent be compensated for by holding next year's meeting in Honduras, but due to funding problems and logistical issues this cannot be realized. Next year's meeting will be held in Baltimore, with the hope that further planning can make the proposed meeting in Honduras a reality for 2011. The importance of this occurrence in keeping Latin American Friends vitally connected with the work of FWCC cannot be overstated.

Despite theological differences, lack of finances, and other challenges, FWCC remains committed to the vital task of bringing Quakers together to do God's work. Meetings such as the one at Canby Grove remind all who are present that the impediments to this work are less onerous than we are inclined to believe and that the potential rewards, both to the Religious Society of Friends and the world at large, are very great.

(submitted by David Shiner)