

## Friends General Conference

### Representative Report

By Charley Earp, Northside Friends Meeting

Communion. A word that rises in my spirit often in worship and thought. It signifies a process of becoming connected, of becoming intimate, of embodying love. Communion is our presence, our being, the shape we take among the world's various groupings.

Friends General Conference is the name of our communion. Illinois Yearly Meeting was absolutely pivotal in the formation of this body in 1900. We continue year after year to give to it of our substance and our labor.

This past year has been one of transitions in our communion, new connections being born, old ones laid down. FGC has felt it necessary to re-evaluate its work thoroughly. One primary motivator has been the threat of financial stress due to the economic situation.

The good news is that FGC has not seen massive shortfalls in its finances. Prior to the economic crisis, FGC had already become deliberate in managing its finances and resources in a responsible manner. This served us well when donations began to decline.

As we know, crisis is also opportunity. FGC discerned an opportunity to examine its practices and institutions. We did what every Quaker body in our day would do when facing a crisis, we formed a committee!! (You may giggle politely!)

The newly-minted Ad Hoc Priorities Committee was composed of several of our experienced and weighty members. A survey was sent throughout the many limbs of our body to seek and know our condition. Changes began as way opened.

FGC has sought to cut expenses, even to the point of cutting staff hours and even whole positions. These have been among the most painful of all our decisions, yet all agree that our long-term health as an organization requires serious resolve. To date, the actual job losses are not large considering what has happened to other Quaker organizations. Yet no decision to terminate a person's employment - especially of those whose work has been so worthy - can be made without a sense of loss.

This has meant a renewed focus on the many representatives and volunteers to carry the essential weight of our shared ministry and work. This seems to be in the spirit in which early Friends understood ministry, as a labor of love, not for financial remuneration. We ask your support as we continue moving forward in these matters.

As to our work, I'd like to draw your attention especially to the Quaker Quest program. This program has been in existence in London and other parts of England for several

years. It is a labor-intensive effort to mobilize local meetings for the work of testimony and outreach to our communities.

I, for one, see Quaker Quest as a welcome opportunity to renew and enrich our common life. Quakers often focus on our internal doings or on social concerns, but rarely on actively inviting others into our midst to share our light. While not exactly evangelism, Quaker Quest asks all of us - whether we implement its program or not - to share our good news.

There are many other ministries of FGC to mention here; our bookstore and publications (which are undergoing the same prioritizing and refocusing), the annual Gathering (which has now been reduced to 6 days for the indefinite future), our ecumenical work (which is being re-evaluated and enhanced), and much more.

I wish to thank the ILYM nominating committee for offering me this opportunity. I do not always feel gifted or disciplined enough for this work, but I also know that I am far from alone as I undertake it.

Friends General Conference is our communion, our far-flung family across this continent. FGC is our hands, eyes, ears, and voice beyond the yearly meeting. Its life is directly connected to our life.

I want to close with a few lines from the "Minute of Purpose" and "Statement of Major Goals" which the Central Committee adopted last October. The full text can be found at [www.FGCQuaker.org](http://www.FGCQuaker.org) on the "About FGC" page.

"Friends General Conference, with Divine guidance, nurtures the spiritual vitality of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) by providing programs and services for Friends, meetings, and seekers." FGC works "to grow and sustain a vital, diverse, and loving community of Friends based on a shared search for unity in the Spirit."

Peace! Charley