

2009-2010 Field Secretary Report

In the last year, I visited seventeen Illinois Yearly Meeting meetings and worship groups, attended too many memorial services, helped Ministry & Advancement with two activities (a workshop on websites and a subcommittee working on end of life issues), participated in three workshops and a Quaker workers' retreat, and facilitated a silent retreat for Friends in the Chicago area. In the course of my visits, I made presentations on outreach, deepening worship, the peace testimony, Quaker business process, seeking and finding spiritual unity, discerning our personal calls to ministry, and what it means to live as and in a covenant community.

Looking back, I feel that strengthening our small, scattered communities and increasing outreach have been at the heart of my work.

Early in the year, I began to carry a box of books that I felt were of value to our meetings. At first, I described this as a traveling library, but it soon became clear that lending out and getting back materials was, at best, difficult. After consulting with the Ministry & Advancement Committee, it was decided that I should treat the collection as a bookstore. This has been very successful – getting valuable resources into the hands of individuals and meetings. On occasion, when it was obvious that a meeting or an individual needed a particular resource, but could not pay for it, I have freely given copies of materials to further encourage their use.

This traveling bookstore has been of particular value in promoting outreach. Of the various materials, the ones I most prominently display were those on how to be present and welcoming in our communities. I have found it especially helpful to pass the materials around for people to look at while giving a brief description of each – holding a book or pamphlet in your hand and paging through it is much better than just hearing a description.

Although I have now been to most of our meetings and worship groups more than once, I still try to imagine how we are seen by newcomers. At this point, I have little to add to the comments I made at last year's annual sessions – essentially, we need to be more proactive. Do we open our doors to the strangers who seek spiritual comfort among us? Do we welcome them to our portion of God's holy mountain and make them joyful in our house of prayer?

There has been improvement in the past year – particularly in our meetings' presence on the internet – but most of our meetings still need better physical signage and more concern for making our meeting spaces neat, attractive, and welcoming. We need to have more and better

information immediately available for visitors. We need to re-learn how to speak plainly – to put aside quaint phrases and ritualistic language that builds barriers. For example, everyone who is new to meeting should be offered a single-page handout that tells what to expect in silent worship in a few simple, straight-forward words. Likewise, if we are serious about outreach to minority communities, we need to consider ahead of time what needs to be done so that they feel welcome. Having materials in Spanish might be one step. If there are pictures displayed, do any of them show people of color?

If we wait until someone is standing in our doorway before preparing a place for them in our meeting, it is too late.

The silent retreat I mentioned above was of particular significance to me this year and may point the way for my work in the coming year. In January, I had a free Saturday in Chicago, and decided to use it as an opportunity to offer a retreat in the 57th St. meetinghouse. The retreat focused on the differences between Quaker uses of silence and two similar forms – contemplation and meditation. Rather than thinking about God or seeking to withdraw into solitude, in Quaker silence we seek to experience God – to gain knowledge *of*, rather than knowledge *about* God – and in doing so, to come into communion with a worshiping community. The retreat consisted of a series of exercises that sought to increase awareness of our surroundings and of those quietly sitting with us. The retreat participants found the day to be spiritually valuable.

In the last two years, most of my work for the yearly meeting has been reacting to your requests, but the experience of this retreat has led me to think about how I might anticipate and offer useful retreats, workshops, or other activities. I am working with Ministry & Advancement on how best to implement this in the coming year.

Outside of my work for the yearly meeting, I taught one semester-long course (on modern Quaker life and thought), two week-long courses (one on William Penn and one on Elias Hicks), and made a number of presentations to other Quaker bodies. Finally, the new edition of *The Journal of Elias Hicks* that I have been working on for the past several years was published and I am delighted with it. It has been a busy and productive year for me – I hope it was of value to the yearly meeting.