

# Illinois Yearly Meeting Field Secretary Report

## ***June 2011***

This has been a good year for me. As a primary responsibility, I visited with Friends in thirteen of our monthly meetings and worship groups, both quarterly meetings, and an Hispanic Evangelical Friends Meeting south of Chicago. In addition to these travels among ILYM Friends, I worked on two major projects, each designed to bring something new to our yearly meeting.

## **Salt & Light**

In the summer and fall of 2010, I devoted great deal of time to arranging five “Salt & Light” presentations (Friends World Committee for Consultation mini-regional events) at Lake Forest, Downers Grove, Columbia, St. Louis, and Southern Illinois Meetings. My part in this was to coordinate between the meetings and with FWCC, arranging meeting space, food, housing, and transportation – FWCC provided speakers and program for all the events. This work reminded me, once again, that Quakers are subject to the same kinds of enthusiasms as other people; they are not always dependable; and occasionally, they are passive aggressive. At times, the work was frustrating, but in the end, my sense is that these events were valuable for those in attendance and will pay dividends to both the yearly meeting and the FWCC in the years to come.

## **Days of Spiritual Sustenance**

Over the winter and into the spring, I concentrated on service to two of the more needful constituencies of the yearly meeting: our smaller meetings and our spiritual nurturers.

We are aware of the problems facing our small meetings. Often, they feel isolated, alone, and barely holding on. While larger meetings can pool resources to achieve their goals, small meetings don't have that option. Moreover, when spiritual opportunities are offered, they come at a distance and at a cost in time and money that frequently seems excessive to a meeting with meager resources.

We are less aware of the degree to which we fail our spiritual nurturers. Too often, we accept their contributions to our meetings and to ourselves without recognizing the costs they bear on our behalf. And, to be fair, we are ignorant in part because they are not likely to complain – until, that is, they exceed some internal limit and they withdraw entirely, sometimes for a period of rest, too often for good.

These two sets of needs fall especially hard on the nurturers in small meetings. They are few in number, so they have to take on a wider variety of tasks. As a result, nurturers in small meetings are even more likely to burn out, and their small meetings, who depend on them so much, suffer disproportionately for the loss.

Historically, there were Meetings of Ministers and Elders at the quarterly meeting and yearly meeting levels. These meetings were composed of the spiritual leaders in all of the particular meetings. Coming together several times each year for worship and fellowship encouraged interconnections between the nurturers in the individual meetings. These gatherings provided opportunities to share burdens and provide mutual support. Unfortunately, this practice was lost

in the last century, as each meeting claimed more independence and our religious community became less interdependent. The price of this independence is that we are increasingly fragile

A series of days of spiritual nurture was proposed to address these needs. It was decided to offer this opportunity on four days in four locations chosen to make it most convenient for those in the smaller meetings to attend – Oak Park, St. Louis, Chesterton, Indiana, and Bloomington. And in order to encourage anyone named by their meeting to attend, all costs were borne by the Ministry and Advancement Committee – including, as needed, help with participants' travel and child care expenses.

A primary concern in developing these events was how to get the right people to participate. Simply asking nurturers to self-identify would seem to be the easiest way forward, but some of those who are most in need of spiritual care are also so self-effacing that they would never put themselves forward. It seemed better to ask meetings to name two or three people to attend. This also created an opportunity for meetings to grant a degree of recognition to those who are often taken for granted. It soon became clear that some meetings were uncomfortable in choosing who to attend, but this, in itself, was a valuable exercise. Our inability or outright refusal to acknowledge the reality of individual spiritual gifts – gifts given uniquely, not universally – weakens us as a society and contributes to the burnout of our nurturers.

Thirty-six people from nine meetings and one person from outside the yearly meeting participated. Five others, named by two other meetings, were unable to attend. I believe these events were very successful. The sharing in these sessions was deep and unguarded; and the participants felt renewed by their participation.

One unexpected aspect of these four days has been the times we have spent discussing the traditional roles of minister, elder, and overseer – how each is unique and why each was created. Generally, it was felt that we lose something important when these are all lumped together. Each task requires particular spiritual gifts and people need practice in exercising these gifts if they are going to get good at them. When a single person is required to serve in multiple roles, he or she may be “pretty good” at each of them, but may never grow into the person they could have been. Moreover, when a person tries to exercise multiple gifts, the work involved in trying to do too many things risks his or her becoming spiritually, if not physically, exhausted.

The initial impetus for these events was a spiritual leading and the changes over time have been the products of spiritual discernment, not a process of intellectual development for which I can claim credit. This work of discernment has been greatly facilitated by others, in particular, the members of the Ministry and Advancement Committee who helped me articulate the vision and labored with me to make each session better than the one before.

## **The Traveling Bookstore**

Finally, in the last couple of years, an accidental ministry has been growing up in my travels. It began simply enough. I had some books, pamphlets, and other materials on outreach that I thought might be of value to our meetings, so I threw them in a box and carried them along as I visited with monthly meetings and worship groups. Inevitably, someone wanted to borrow one or another of them. At first, I was reluctant to let them go – these were my personal copies and I had accumulated them over a period of many years. What if they got lost? What if I couldn't replace them? But good sense lost out to trusting that this was a leading. It seemed silly to say no

and the traveling bookstore was born. Since then, I have sold scores of books and pamphlets. I believe the benefits of getting these materials into our meetings will be felt for years to come.

## **Farewell**

This is my final report to the yearly meeting, although I will be continuing to serve you into the fall of this year. My three years as field secretary have been spiritually fulfilling, as well as physically exhausting. My love for you all has grown with each opportunity you have given me.

Thank you.

Paul Buckley