

FINAL REPORT TO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Ad Hoc Committee for Quaker Sweat Lodge Discernment

The Ad Hoc Committee for Quaker Sweat Lodge Discernment was formed in September 2006. Our charge was to address concerns around the Quaker Sweat Lodge (QSL) that were growing in the 90's and erupted in 2004. In 2004 Long Range Conference Planning (LRCP) decided to cancel the QSL Workshop planned for that year's Gathering in Amherst. This decision was made in part as a response to a letter from a representative of the Mashpee-Wampanoag tribal council. The issue was further complicated by pre-existing controversies.

Our committee was charged as follows:

The ad hoc committee is asked to recommend to Long Range Conference Planning committee a way forward on the matter of the Quaker Sweat Lodge – one that takes into consideration the various understandings and points of view. The committee should consult with Long Range as needed on some of the practical aspects of the Quaker Sweat. The committee is also asked to address the concern for how Friends hear each other in a loving and open spirit particularly when there are strongly held opinions and understandings and to report to Executive committee on its work. *(Marian Beane, presiding clerk, FGC, 9/12/06)*

We set as goals for ourselves to be as inclusive and transparent as possible, to be mindful of the healing needed, and to be a model of how that healing work can be done. Our formal meetings began at Pendle Hill January 2007, then over dinner at the October 2007 Central Committee meeting in New Windsor, again at Pendle Hill January 2008, and most recently in Pittsburgh July 2008.

LISTENING

Since January 2007, the committee has engaged in a listening process that offered diverse opportunities for Friends General Conference (FGC) Friends to share their views with us. We received 27 emails and 3 letters in response to our “wanted” notice in the February 2007 FGC Connection. We set up a “listening table” on two afternoons at the 2007 Gathering in River Falls

and were visited by 16 Friends. The Sunday after the Gathering, we spent the better part of a day listening to two of the QSL coordinators, George Price and Cullen Carns-Hilliker. (Breeze Richardson was unable to join us, but we had the benefit of her panel presentation at the 2006 Gathering in Tacoma). We read the various letters and articles regarding the QSL that were published in The Friends Journal and we read Marshall Massey's blog on the QSL that included 30 more responses. On a parallel track, we reviewed material on Native American perspectives regarding inter-cultural sharing/appropriation of their faith ceremonies. This included two of us attending the "American Friends and Native Americans" workshop offered by American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) representatives at the 2007 Gathering in River Falls. And finally we noted that at least 8 of the responses to our offers to listen came from Friends who self-identified as Native American.

(Note that this report uses the terms "Native American" and "North American Indian". Other terms are sometimes preferred, e.g. in Canada where "First Nations" and "Aboriginals" are used. At the UN the preferred term is "Indigenous People." Also note that, in the absence of any other context, "we" or "Friends" means all of us who are part of FGC's branch of The Religious Society of Friends. WE are a bottom up organization rooted in our monthly meetings, so even when "we" is used in a context that can only mean those present at a meeting, those present are still an extension of the larger we of which we are all a part.)

The Ad Hoc Committee received comments on our Draft Preliminary Report, first presented at the January 2008 Executive Committee. Three of us were present for a Friday night and Saturday morning review and discussion of our Draft Preliminary Report at the March 2008 Long Range Conference Planning (LRCP) meeting, during which we received many diverse comments. We also solicited and received detailed comments on our Draft Preliminary Report from involved and knowledgeable Friends.

Not surprisingly, the Ad Hoc Committee heard many points of view, which were often deeply held and in fundamental conflict with each other. These included such issues as:

- The power of the QSL as a transformative experience, especially for young Friends.
- The appropriateness **or** inappropriateness of the QSL to Quaker faith:

- concerns about the use of ritual
- concerns about emotional and physical safety in a powerful physical experience
- concerns about possible mind-altering practices
- larger questions about addressing the spiritual education of our youth
- The need to acknowledge and respect Native American groups, especially those local to the Gathering.
- The pain that can be caused to the many Native Americans who see events like the QSL as cultural appropriation.
- The way in which the QSL uniquely incorporates Quaker beliefs and practices while respectful of and inspired by Native American traditions.
- The pain caused by the conflicts surrounding the QSL and felt by many members of our FGC community regardless of their perspective or position. In particular:
 - some felt that they were not understood or respected for the depth and value of their concern to act responsibly on behalf of FGC and the Gathering.
 - others felt that they were not understood or respected for the depth and value of the ministry shared.
 - some felt betrayed by a failure of process which they held dear.
- A long-standing apathy and disinterest: “it happened, get over it, move on.”
- A growing disappointment frustration impatience fatigue giving up, all from not being heard, understood, or respected. “It is easy to say we are heard, but not be heard. There is no real movement. We are stuck.”
- A deep-seated resistance to new possibilities.

Another factor that emerged during our listening was that these conflicts (and related interpersonal conflicts) were present but occurring out of view for several years prior to cancellation of the 2004 QSL. One part of these conflicts dealt with confusion regarding differences in funding and procedures among and between Centers and Workshops.

As people struggled with their strongly held feelings, they offered possible solutions:

1. Discontinue both parts of the QSL, the Sweat and the Workshop, at any FGC sponsored activity.

2. Discontinue the Sweat at the Gathering, but encourage George Price, Breeze Richardson, Cullen Carns-Hilliker and other Quakers to still give the Workshop at the Gathering.
3. Invite local Native Americans to participate in the Workshop and, if they feel led, to give a Sweat Lodge on their own territory to which Gathering attendees are invited.
4. Invite local Native Americans to participate in a Workshop and, if they feel led, to give a Sweat Lodge on Gathering premises.
5. Continue the QSL (both Sweat & Workshop) at the Gathering but only in consultation with a local Native American group.
6. Continue the QSL exactly as it was prior to 2004.
7. Offer the QSL under a different name to reflect the many non-Native American sources for this practice.

(For any kind of sweat lodge at the Gathering, the requirement for obtaining necessary permissions from host campus and community was also noted.)

Clearly the Ad Hoc Committee was given a huge task to accomplish: first, to collect and understand all the information and, second, to offer a way forward to a long standing and bitter dispute. None the less, as we continued to listen and reflect and discern among ourselves, some common themes began to emerge. Instead of trying to sort out the conflicting points of view, we gradually shifted to noticing that some of the same strong emotions were expressed within each point of view.

DISCERNING – Within FGC

Prior to 2004: Adult Young Friends (YAF) were laboring with QSL issues as early as 2002 but their concerns and issues were not known or engaged by the broader adult community. LRCP was laboring with conflicts over the QSL but also without bearing fruit. Long Range Conference Planning (LRCP) held two threshing sessions that involved deep listening but while these sessions led to a better mutual understanding no agreement about way forward was reached.

2004 to today: LRCP was already deeply unsettled when it received the Mashpee-Wampanoag letter; we were ill prepared to deal faithfully with the matter. Instead of the inclusive and Spirit-led corporate discernment of a gathered people, we came together with preexisting contentious issues that included:

- Dismay over recurring devotion of time to struggles with QSL that felt disproportionate to other important committee issues.
- Continuing uneasiness over apparent differences in logistical support given to QSL compared to other workshops or centers.
- Personality conflicts within LRCP and between LRCP and QSL, and QSL supporters.

These are the fires that the Mashpee-Wampanoag letter brought back to life, to which it then added the additional heat of an urgent short deadline. And because the letter mentioned racism and raised the issue of cultural appropriation, the Committee for Ministry on Racism (CMR) was drawn in. Together with the FGC's General Secretary and the LRCP clerks and staff, CMR became a lightning rod for all the varieties of unhappiness, discontent and anger we came to feel as a result of our struggles to deal with these issues.

No wonder the Ad Hoc Committee heard stories of deep hurt from all sides of this controversy. Time has still not healed these wounds, but the committee is hopeful that this can change as all of us learn to do a better job of embracing diversity. Simply listening to each other is not enough. In order to do this, Friends must learn to embrace conflict in a way that honors, holds and cherishes disparate views.

Our Quaker process aspires to find a way forward that brings everyone to unity, even when they disagree. Among other things this requires that all the key players and decision makers are fully informed and fully involved in the process. It requires everyone to understand the depth of concerns held by the various diverse points of view and to have faith in the process.

This did not happen. As a result, some felt that others did not understand or respect the depth of their concern and commitment to honor their responsibility for FGC and the Gathering. Similarly others felt that they were not understood or respected for the depth of their commitment and

responsibility to their ministry. And still others felt betrayed by a failure of process which they held dear.

DISCERNING – In relationship to Native Americans

Our ability to discern a way forward was also limited by our lack of any broad common ground with Native Americans. FGC Quakers of Native American descent (of which there may be a good number) do not generally self-identify and have not formed a group we could turn to for advice. Similarly we could not turn to meetings with close relationships to neighboring tribes because for the most part those relationships have diminished over time. This is not as true in Canada thanks to the hard work of both Canadian Aboriginals and Canadian Friends. While some Yearly Meetings in the States do still have Indian Committees, these exist primarily to give out grants in response to requests by Indians. As a consequence, FGC and its constituent meetings have little context or resource for discerning right action regarding Native Americans based on an on-going relationship with mutual understanding and trust. All we can do for guidance is to look to the connections we do have and at the prevailing views among the larger North American Indian community.

Within the North American Indian community, the diversity of views and the intensity of responses regarding the sharing of faith traditions with non-Indians vary even within families and clans as well as among native groups of North America. Native American perspectives range from some religious leaders who actively promote open sharing both as a means of cultural survival and as a way of improving the world, to some political leaders who strongly advocate taking back every cultural element that has been appropriated by the dominant culture. Between those extremes there are all varieties of fierce arguments and numbing apathy. If there is a common theme across this spectrum, it is that Native Americans are proud of their heritage but tired of being sidelined by continuing discrimination and injustice.

As our committee learned more about these complex and painful conflicts, we came to realize that we FGC Quakers have lost some of our historical integrity in our relationship to our North American Indian brothers and sisters. The cliché about all politics being local is especially true among Native Americans. Yet we Quakers have gradually lost most of our tradition of maintaining

local neighborly dialog and local interfaith exchange. In large part, we have transferred these concerns to our national organizations. (Both AFSC and FCNL have had active Native American advocacy programs, which are now at risk of funding cuts.) We delegated away our personal face-to-face understanding of the continuing struggle of Native Americans as they live their daily lives in our local regions. It is out of this realization that our committee recommends that FGC (and Quakers in general) strengthen our engagement with our Native American neighbors. We have much to learn from each others' spiritual paths. And we need the common ground of mutual understanding and respect if there is ever to be any meaningful dialog about cultural appropriation, even just internally among Quakers.

It is also out of this discernment that our committee understood that both the integrity of the QSL's ministry, which grew in part out of a gift from individual Native Americans, and the integrity of the larger Indian community's pain from all the broken promises, left us little room for compromise. The suggestion of changing the QSL name to delete the words "sweat lodge" is an unacceptable denial of truth and integrity. The possibility of negotiating with local Native American groups at each Gathering site seemed equally troubling to all concerned until some greater work is done.

CONCLUSIONS

Out of this discernment our committee understood that we could not respond to our charge with simple direct answers. All we can do is raise issues and suggest directions. In many ways the worst thing that could happen is that this report would lull us into a sense that the issues raised are resolved and behind us. All we have really done is to lift up and clarify the issues, the real work of healing wounds, exploring differences, and nurturing the challenging changes needed, all lie ahead.

Both externally with Native American communities, and internally within the FGC community, we Quakers have failed to nurture that broader sense of community wherein we are all children of the light. We have failed to create a community that can embrace conflict and diversity while still respectfully living in sacred community together on common ground.

Both internally and externally we have failed to sustain the kind of deeper friendship that can hear and honor differences and pain within an overriding framework of love and respect. As a result, when the time came for us to consider action in response to an apparent crisis, we suddenly found that there was very little common ground. There was no deeper understanding of the turmoil and controversy into which we were stepping, even though it had been swirling around us for years.

We needed to create a response to the Mashpee-Wampanoag letter, but we did not agree on the nature and urgency of that response, and in fact we did not even agree on the underlying issues. None the less, a strongly felt sense of urgency prevailed and that prevented us from spending the time needed to reflect, consult, and discern. As a consequence, a decision was reached, but no corporate unity was achieved. If anything, our disparate positions became more deeply entrenched and, even with the best intentions, we hurt one another by engaging in attack, withdrawal, or indifference. Ironically these results are precisely why Quakers lift up “the sense of the meeting” as our model for good decision making: we aspire to reach decisions in a manner that lets everyone share the common ground, participate in the movement of Spirit, and therefore leaves everyone in unity, even when they disagree.

Perhaps the most difficult conclusion to deal with is the perception of abuse of power. This perception followed from the way that the urgency to protect FGC and the Gathering prevented spending the time needed for good process. To some outside the process this appeared to be an abuse of power, and some on the inside felt it even more deeply. What is important to note is that many Friends were acting in accordance with their deepest convictions of what they saw as the highest truth. There was room for all on this common ground but conditions were such that a spirit of sharing did not prevail. Instead the felt need for rapid action led to compromises in our Quaker process. Any decision to cancel the QSL at the Amherst Gathering would have been controversial in itself, no matter how compelling. But in addition, this decision was now clouded by coming out of a compromised process: not working through the preexisting contentious issues, not including central players, not taking time to reflect, allowing the meeting to gather and Spirit to enter. The sense of urgency prevailed. As a result, immediately after the decision was made the resentment began.

This is a recurring problem among Friends when matters of worldly urgency are under consideration. Friends do not have an expectation of suddenly switching to a different process altogether. When do we need to use our spiritual discernment and go slow and when can we (or must we) act because it really is urgent to act? When that happens, Friends need to take the time and care to deal effectively with the aftermath.

Attempts were made to resolve the conflicts and redress the grievances and harm. There have been listening sessions, dialogs, and many meetings, but it has been a difficult process towards reconciliation and healing in our community. As before, there has not been enough deep listening and sharing of each others pain to be able to embrace and move forward. We have the skills within our community, we just have not yet applied them to the extent necessary.

The grace that has emerged from this conflict is that at the highest level of discussion, we are in unity. We all want to act in a way that honors and respects our Native American brothers and sisters. We all want practices that open Quakers, especially young Quakers, to a deepening engagement with God. And we want to celebrate and respect the spiritual gifts of all, including the younger members of our community.

RECOMMENDATIONS - General

How can we restore our connectedness, our compassion and understanding, with each other and with our Native American neighbors, so that inclusive and Spirit-led discernment is truly possible? We offer no immediate solution. Instead we recommend recommitting ourselves to what has always been our path and trust in Spirit to lead us where we need to go. We offer the following thoughts and queries:

1. *Recognize that by cancelling the QSL in Amherst, we avoided external conflict and struggles with the Mashpee-Wampanoag and were brought to confront internal issues and conflicts that need understanding and healing. Recognize that this work is not over.*

Queries: What are we called to do in response of the issues raised by this report? How shall we continue to grow and improve in our dealings with each other and our neighbors?

2. *Recognize the hard truth that the QSL as we have known it will never happen again at the Gathering. Even if everyone from all sides came together in support of doing this, our experience would not be the same: all that has gone before will have altered it inexorably. Perhaps something new will emerge in the future, but for now it is time to let go of seeking any form of restoration of the QSL at the Gathering.*

Query: How can we continue exploring ways we can experience the Divine, ways that involve our bodies with nature in deep reverence, physical as well as spiritual?

3. *Recognize that the QSL is the chosen framework for the ministry of George Price. Recognize and be grateful that for a brief time, the Gathering in general and its young people in particular were blessed with the gifted ministry of George Price who touched and nurtured the hot coals of faith within many hearts, young and old. Recognize that the QSL, as the framework for his ministry, addressed deep needs of some to engage our faith with our bodies and with the earth, air, fire and water that are the core of our physical existence. Recognize that George, Cullen and Breeze found and shared a ministry for a spiritual path that was inspired by Native religions, but which became mixed up in controversy and political events beyond their intent and imagining.*

Queries: How can we create and maintain safe space for new ministers, and be open to gifted ministry in unexpected forms? How can we labor lovingly and transparently with each other over these challenges and the inevitable conflicts that they bring?

4. *Recognize that deep wounds remain **on all sides** still today. Recognize that many who were not directly involved feel the effects of these wounds or continue to feel some wounding themselves. Recognize that these continued wounds affect the work of FGC.*

Queries: How can we reconnect with valued members of our community in a way that allows mutual growth to take place in the sharing of spiritual gifts? How can we listen deeply and recognize each of our own complicity in this and seek forgiveness? Are we willing to be ready to heal?

5. *Recognize that we hold the Gathering each year on some Native Americans' traditional territory. Print it in the Gathering promotional literature.*

Queries: Do we keep ourselves informed about our Native American neighbors? How can we reinvigorate our connection with Native American communities and recognize the gift we receive in using their ancestral land. Do we act on opportunities for relationship? How can Yearly Meetings develop on-going relationships with local Native Americans and maintain an on-going commitment to those relationships? How can FGC be a catalyst for reconnecting at the local level? Is there a way for the host Yearly Meeting to invite local Native Americans to participate in some way in the Gathering, e.g. sharing our different ways of listening to the movement of Spirit, telling our stories?

6. *Recognize the power of our process of spiritual discernment when rightly practiced.*

Queries: Do we celebrate our diversity? Do we avoid urgency? Do we avoid trying to make resolution occur? How do we listen for the seeds of conflict that are sown by disparate views? Do we avoid thinking the conflict will go away? Do we avoid deliberating on any matter when individuals central to that issue are not present? How can we seek to embrace the conflict and let it stand, giving honor and respect to all involved? Are we certain that all are heard? Do we seek understanding and compassion? Do we let go of personal positions and listen for the voice of the Divine?

7. *Recognize that we need to recommit ourselves to our practices. The above advices are familiar to us all. Yet we stray from them at times. We succumb to the worldly pressures of urgency and cost, embarrassment and protection. We need to ward against this.*

Queries: How do we find a way to catch and correct ourselves when we stray from these practices? How do we hold our concern for these issues and speak out when needed? How do we lay aside our own wishes and prejudices as we seek with others to discern God's will?

RECOMMENDATIONS – Specific

TO LONG RANGE CONFERENCE PLANNING (LRCP) - Way Forward Regarding QSL:

1. We recommend that LRCP acknowledge that the QSL, or any similar activity, can no longer occur at the Gathering until the following problems are resolved:
 - a. The central parties involved are currently unwilling to undertake or to feel safe around a reinstated or reinvented QSL without conditions that others of the central parties find unacceptable. (Even if the parties were willing, the context, energy, and indeed the very spirit of the QSL can not be replicated at the Gathering until much more work is done.)
 - b. The widely held, though not universal, view among Native Americans across the continent is that non-native sweat lodges are offensive and objectionable to them. FGC has little context or resource for discerning any other right action regarding Native Americans. This will not change until FGC, primarily through local meetings, has developed mutual understanding and trust with local tribes, through committed on-going relationships.
 - c. Whether or not LRCP feels called to work on the resolution of the above problems is up to LRCP, or direction from Central or Executive Committees.

2. We recommend that LRCP consider how it will address potentially controversial programs in the future. Some aspects of its process or practices that may have lead to some of the difficulties with the QSL include:
 - a. Work to clarify LRCP procedures in a way that leaves every program treated in a clear, consistent and equitable manner.
 - b. Test controversies over time with all Friends involved and seek help from outside the committee for conflicts that need to be more fully aired and more deeply understood.

TO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE - Way Forward Regarding Strongly Held Opinions:

1. We recommend that Executive Committee consider instituting procedures and programs to help identify, bring into the open, appreciate and understand the conflicts that are constantly rising up around us. Many programs exist whether as diversity training or mediation. Quakers often say that Friends are “conflict adverse”, that we are reluctant to sit with our discomfort. We avoid bringing up areas of disagreement and when we do we rarely labor thoughtfully toward mutual understanding and respect. Yet sitting in silence with the uncomfortable hot coals of faith lies at the center of our practice. Our difficulty with difficult people and difficult ministries and difficult practices is an opportunity to celebrate and embrace diversity that can help us grow spiritually.
2. We recommend that Executive Committee consider ways to help committees hold, support and review their process so that when we succumb to worldly pressures of time, cost and energy, there is someone there to catch us and remind us to stay true to our process.
3. We recommend that the above issues receive special attention when staff, officers and leaders are involved. When we are engaged in those roles, we serve FGC Friends, we do not govern. As staff, officers and leaders we have an additional weight of expectation to avoid conflicts with the Friends we serve. Consider whether Friends in these roles have skills and/or should be trained in skills for dealing with difficult people and for maintaining right order in their relationships.

TO ALL OF US – We recommend this statement made earlier in the report:

The grace that has emerged from this conflict is that at the highest level of discussion, we are in unity. We all want to act in a way that honors and respects our Native American brothers and sisters. We all want practices that open Quakers, especially young Quakers, to a deepening engagement with God. And we want to celebrate and respect the spiritual gifts of all, including the younger members of our community.

Ad Hoc Committee for Quaker Sweat Lodge Discernment

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