

# Living Our Convictions

Nadine Hoover October 1, 2006

## Faithfulness

The first call is to God, to faithfulness. Out of faithfulness rises the call to live in peace. In these times, we hear God calling us to live peaceably ourselves in all our relationships.

“ —New York Yearly Meeting, July 30, 2004

Over the past three or four years, Friends in New York have begun to experiment with Meetings for Faithfulness, in which a few Friends gather to seek and name what's true for us individually and as a group. Small groups of three to eight people gather in worship. Since many of us travel quite some distance, these meetings take place every month to six weeks, although those who live closer to each other are able to meet every one to three weeks. The regularity seems to matter more than the frequency. We meet to actively:

- ground ourselves in the presence and nature of the Living Spirit
- seek faithfulness within the companionship and discernment of others
- base our lives on our best sense of truth, love, and faithfulness
- name truths that are working and growing within each of us
- name those truths that are true for all of us as corporate testimonies.

We sit in silence, wait expectantly upon the Divine, and attend and yield to the Living Spirit. Each of us may bring and use any materials—reading, writing, or drawing. Our focus is on discerning what it means to be faithful in our daily lives. As we feel led we may:

- speak out of the silence from the Spirit Within
- share personal experiences of discoveries or experiments in our lives
- allow silence between speakers
- listen deeply to others without responding
- give everyone a chance to speak.

We discipline ourselves to:

- speak simply and plainly of truths that are working within
- give words offered time to work and see where they lead
- resist using too many words
- be open to hard truths and questions
- be lovingly gentle with newly sprouting truths.

We may record minutes for ourselves and for the group as unity arises. Minutes for individuals record Truth in one's own name if the group senses that it is coming from the Spirit. We may not understand, agree, or even like it. That is not the question. The only question is, "Does it seem that it is coming from the Spirit?" Minutes for the group record Truths that we concur are true for all of us. We often share a meal following two to four hours of worship. This kind of meeting is always a venture of faith. We depart as we entered, quietly, praying that we will each feel the Living Spirit with us in the days ahead.

We seek what rings true at the core. Truth is often not packaged in our size. It may seem inadequately small or enormously overwhelming. We seek to name the Truth as it is, not to construct or hunt for one "just my size."

Discernment of the Truth working within us is a full-time occupation, not just for meetings. It is in every moment, every consideration, and every impulse throughout every day. It is who we are.

After five years of Faithfulness Meetings, Vicki Cooley, of Central Finger Lakes Meeting, said, "I'm just beginning to get a flavor of what this experiment in faithfulness is like; I'm not sure others really realize how your witness has grown out of 15 years of this practice!" I can say it has changed me. But it is only through the doing of it that one grows more and more fully into a life of faithfulness to the Living Spirit.

## **Conscientious objection to violence and coercion**

“The Living Spirit works in the world to bring life, joy, peace, and prosperity through love, integrity, and compassionate justice among people. We are united in this Power. We acknowledge that paying for war violates our religious conviction. We will witness to this religious conviction in each of our communities.

—New York Yearly Meeting, April 1, 2006

In 1999, a member of Peace Concerns Committee of New York Yearly Meeting approached me outside the auditorium at yearly meeting:

“We were talking in committee today about how we are being prepared for something, something historic. We don’t know what it is, but we feel ready! We thought of asking people and your name came up. What do you sense we are being prepared for?”

The answer was laid upon me in that instant. I replied: “Don’t ask the question if you’re not prepared to yield. Our dear Friend Sandra Cronk warned us of the dis-ease that settles in when we think we are ready but, when the Light comes, we refuse to yield. You really do not want to know the answer.”

“Yes, yes! We do. We really do. We’re ready.”

“Okay.” I said, “It’s a corporate conviction against paying for war.”

He paled and said, “Oh, no. That may be a bit too much.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. You wanted an historic action that would not change your life. Well, let me see....”

He smiled.

That was the end of that conversation, but the burden was upon me. “Why was I given this message?” I railed against the heavens. “I was not the one asking the question! Why do I have to know this?” But there it was. As I spoke it, people gathered to hear. It moved people.

There is much valid laboring on in this matter, but in the end we return to the core—war is wrong and paying for war is wrong. As long as we place our faith in violence and coercion, then love, integrity, and compassionate justice remain luxuries we can’t afford. But when we accept as simple fact that violence and coercion are wrong and lay them down, then integrity, love, and compassionate justice become imperative.

Seven years after that conversation, New York Yearly Meeting approved a statement of faith testifying to the Power of the Living Spirit and acknowledging that paying for war violates our religious conviction. This statement not only reaffirms our Peace Testimony, but shifts from supporting or encouraging individual acts of conscience to claiming a corporate testimony laid upon all of us. U.S. courts have rejected cases on war tax resistance saying they cannot accommodate individuals, but the courts may not say no so easily to an entire religious body.

Taxes are not the only roots of war in our lives. We must also consider where our investments are placed, what companies we

patronize, and the currency we use. To have every act of life celebrate and proclaim the Living Spirit requires our full attention as a Religious Society. We are under the weight of getting our daily lives in order so we are available to Truth. The great experiment of faithfulness calls our attention to the Power of the Spirit in our lives and to shaping our outward lives to reflect that inward experience.

To stay grounded in and available to the Spirit, Friends have found it critical to settle debts promptly, keep relationships peaceful, be selective in choice of entertainment, keep possessions simple, and conduct honest, open business dealings. If we are deeply in debt, separated from our families and friends, depressed, or over-committed, then we are not available. If we fear an audit, covet our funds or our time, do not share our faith with our spouse, and so forth, we are not available.

Converting our lives to reflect the Spirit is the work of a lifetime, which begins with the simple act of yielding to, rather than resisting, the Spirit. Will we yield?

### **Service and witness that builds peace**

As I yield to this practice of faithfulness and the conversion of manners, I'm drawn into a more intimate relationship with service and witness.

To be prepared for service and witness, one must overcome spiritual crises and practice an indelible sense of faith. In other words, one must cultivate an awareness of the Living Spirit in every person, all creation, and every moment; experiment with the Spirit in daily life to come to know the Divine personally in the hard times as well as the glorious; be willing to learn, change one's life, and be teachable; test one's sense of conscience and discernment in silence, prayer, Scripture, and with others; and act based on one's best sense of what's right.

Spirit-led service is grounded in realizing that everything we have is a pure gift from the Creator. We are responsible for using what we need and passing the rest on to others as it was freely given to us. Therefore I live simply and share the excess. Through Friends contacts all over the world, we may ask directly how people are doing and together work to meet the minimum needs of all, including safe haven, clean drinking water, nutrition, clothing, housing, primary health care, education, and expression.

As I spend less money, I have so much more to give. As I build relationships through giving, I find the inspiration, motivation, and

awareness to spend even less.

Quaker Home Service and American Friends Service Committee accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on our behalf in 1947, but it was the Religious Society of Friends that was awarded this recognition for “giving from the nameless to the nameless.” We did not do this as part of a master plan or a grand vision; we did this when our consciences were tried by the draft for World War II and we were moved by our faith.

Peace grows out of friendships built on mutuality, honesty, caring, and justice. We reap what we sow. But also, we learn from everyone. I don't fully understand my own life until I have lived with others.

While assisting in the 2004 tsunami aftermath, I discovered the Acehnese have a piece of my life I don't see. They see U.S.-made automatic weapons, meet commanders trained at the School of the Americas, are tortured “the American way,” and drive by the Exxon Mobile compound and huge glass banks in Lhokseumawe as they struggle to earn 39 cents for the medicine needed to cure leprosy.

Many of them say, “We understand that people die in war; we can put that behind us and move on; we want peace. But what we can't just forget is the treatment of women and children.” Restorative justice understands that victims need the community to stand up and say, “This happened, it was wrong, it should not have happened.” When we are willing to name the truth of our wrongdoings, we instill confidence that that wrongdoing will not be accepted.

I took corporate media out of my home. My news and information now comes from independent media. I regularly send articles of what I am doing and thinking to the local newspaper and have been stunned that they print each one immediately. My meeting has begun to take notice and is asking to share the articles with newspapers in their areas too, since our meeting covers a number of towns. I have begun working with radio and video students who hope to help me get information on public radio and television.

Clean, renewable energy is critical for my children's future, but I also realize it needs to be distributed. I can't wait for megaliths to provide solutions to enrich themselves. The abuse of excessive power and wealth is as detrimental as pollution. This fall, in a village in western New York, we are enlisting local university professors, engineers, business leaders, and educated citizens to support, advise, and participate in seeking clean, renewable, distributed energy in our area for homes and businesses, specifically as a faith-based initiative.

I am convinced that we need to revoke the personhood of corporations, whereby they have secured the rights originally granted to the people so that the people would have the power to self-govern. We need to constrain their charters to limited benefits for people as originally designed. (Learn more at the Program on Corporations, Law, and Democracy's website: <http://www.poclad.org>.) As Lucretia Mott said, "There where God dwells there must be true liberty." Our liberty has been given away to the corporate-based mega-rich.

I go through the house one room and one item at a time to research what I know about each and ask if it reflects my faith. It is often my comfort and convenience that get the upper hand. I have discussed this with my neighbors who have agreed to work with me to support young adults to develop businesses consistent with our faith rather than indenture themselves to educational debt and mortgages. I marvel at how cheaply I am willing to trade my faith, typically for mere comfort and convenience!

In my morning devotions I often am reminded of the disgraceful way African- and Native Americans were treated in the settlement of the United States. To heal wounds rather than perpetuate them, I have been asking people in my community whether or not we could pass a resolution that the trans-Atlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity. A village trustee recently asked me if we could pursue that this fall.

As a Quaker and a U.S. citizen, I attend the November 11th Commemoration of the Canandaigua (Pickering) Treaty between the U.S. and the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Nations). The Haudenosaunee only signed the treaty after the Quakers arrived because they knew Friends to care for what is right and to keep their word. If we, as a people, were to honor our treaties, settle land claims and release Leonard Peltier (who has served over 30 years of a 25-year to life sentence for the death of two FBI agents despite testimony by the FBI that he could not have killed them), I would feel we had come a long way in restoring our relationship with Native peoples. But we have to say these terrible things happened, they were wrong, and they should not have happened.

As I do these things, I try to sing, dance, converse and play more with family members and friends. Saturday nights are "family nights" at the request of my nephew, and I look forward to relaxing and playing.

Most of all, we need to stop paying for war and engage in service that builds peace. Will we live up to our legacy and turn to our faith regardless of the consequences? If we do claim our religious

conviction against paying for war, then what alternative service builds peace? We cannot give service and witness away to any particular organization. We must all, every one of us, personally travel in the ministry of service—or support a personal Friend who is—and witness to the Power of the Living Spirit in the world. The time has come; our faith is measured.

Nadine Hoover has served as secretary of Southeastern Yearly Meeting and as clerk of Tallahassee (Fla.) and Alfred (N.Y.) Meetings. She has facilitated Alternatives to Violence workshops since 1978, and serves under a travel minute since 1996 with a concern for youth, Quaker practice, nonviolence, somatics, and early childhood development in the U.S. and Indonesia, building relationships across borders. A video, *Friends in Conscience: Quaker Service in Indonesia*, is available from Alfred Meeting on her opening talk to NYYM Spring Session 2006. Contact Alfred Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 773, Alfred, NY 14802.

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