

BFM ARE session on BYM-FUM

April 13, 2008

(held in the Music Room at Sidwell Friends Lower School)

Approximately twenty-six people attended this session, including our three guests. The session was organized by the Adult Religious Education committee of Bethesda Friends Meeting, with guests invited by Frank Greve. The session was moderated by Stephanie Koenig. These notes were taken by Philip Bogdonoff and edited in partnership with Jillaine Smith.

NOTE: While we have attempted to edit these notes for brevity, we felt that to over-edit might detract from the very purpose of this session, which was to understand the experience of our gay and lesbian f/Friends. Therefore, we have included more detail than we might otherwise. With the exception of invited guests and co-clerks, we have removed the identities of those who spoke.

Frank Greve introduced our guests: **Joe Izzo** is a counselor at the Whitman-Walker Clinic and a member of Friends Meeting of Washington; **Tom Lippert** is a friend of Joe and also a member of FMW; and **Brad Ogilvie** works at William Penn House and is a member of Downers Grove (Illinois) Meeting.

Stephanie Koenig: This meeting has been convened because our Meeting has labored with the issue of Baltimore Yearly Meeting's (BYM) relationship to Friends United Meeting (FUM), especially with regard to FUM's personnel policy – which excludes anyone who may be in a relationship other than (a heterosexual) marriage. As we have grappled with this issue, one of the questions that has arisen is How aware are we in this Meeting, and how sensitive are we, to the experience of our gay and lesbian f/Friends? Do we need to know more? Do we need to be more sensitized? Our intent today is to listen to one another and hear one another - what it is like to be gay or lesbian in today's world, what it is like to be a family member to someone who is gay or lesbian, what does it mean to be a Meeting that is sensitive to gay & lesbian Friends.

Joe Izzo shared his background as member of the Roman Catholic Church and as a member of a Catholic brotherhood for 17 years with a masters in Biblical Studies from LaSalle University in Philadelphia. When he publicly advocated for the ordination for women in the church and then created, under the auspices of the campus ministry at Catholic University (the one US university chartered by the Vatican), a support group for the gay and lesbian students, faculty and staff, he was forced out of the order. He started attending FMW in 1982 by which time he was openly gay. When he tried for a position at Georgetown U., he was told later that the hiring committee was told "We can't hire Joe Izzo. He's a political liability." He has spent the last 22 years

working at the Whitman-Walker Clinic as a LCSW, working very closely with gay, lesbian, transgendered clients, doing counseling and therapy.

As a gay man, he has seen and experienced a lot of marginalization, oppression, treatment as a second-class citizen; he doesn't trust institutions. He discovered at ~15 years old, that he is attracted to the same sex; he and other young gays were told: "You are defective, you're immoral, you're not good enough, you're too far out of the mainstream, and unless you conform to the heterosexual norm, you will be marginalized, you'll be treated as less than." He spends a lot of time in his psychotherapy work at Whitman-Walker counseling people about self-esteem issues, on getting people out of a state of abject shame and inferiority and inadequacy and into feeling like full human beings.

He finds FUM's personnel policy abhorrent, standing against his understanding of the Quaker testimony of equality, and harmony, and integrity. It requires him to deny the truth of who he is. He is opposed to the approach FUM has taken.

Because of his background and training he sees a lot of people who call themselves Christians who are mired in a literal interpretation of scriptures. Quakers *never* have been mired in the scriptures as the final norm of God's will for us. For Quakers scriptures are seen as secondary. Primary is the Inner Light. Scriptures are a guide, not a be all and end all. This stance accepts that there is continuing revelation. That's another theological difference he has with FUM's (and Evangelical Friends') approach.

He called for all of us to get beyond black, white, red, brown, gay and straight, because the future of the planet and all species is at stake.

Brad Ogilvie spoke of his experience living and working in the mid-west. His Meeting has dual affiliation with Western YM and Illinois YM. Western YM (closely affiliated with FUM) put his Meeting on probation after they performed his (same-sex) marriage in 1995. Brad has had HIV for 20+ years and has lived twice beyond his expected years. He feels that gay and lesbian rights are on a positive evolutionary course; that change is coming, that if we come at each other and hold each other with love, we're more likely to move that change forward than if we come out of anger and hate.

He explained that within at least Western YM, and certainly for some within FUM, there are those who don't agree with FUM's personnel policy, but who believe that the policy is going to go away in a few years. The question is what harm are we going to be doing by alienating

ourselves from that process? He described a number of changes that indicate a profound change happening in society in general, including positively changed policies and practices at Brigham Young University and Wheaton College. He described the upheaval and change going on in the evangelical community, which he finds many in FGC-affiliated Meetings are unaware of. He pointed out that the younger generation operates in a much more fluid way, and do not identify themselves in traditional ways: "I'm not African-American, but multiracial ... pansexual ... polyamorous." The younger generation is looking at people as humans, not as demographics.

His experience: He has been patronized because he has AIDS; invited to things not because people know him, but because he is gay. That said, he finds that things are improving; gay people are finding inclusion much more where they are, rather than having to leave their families and communities to find acceptance elsewhere.

Regarding relations with FUM, he reminded us that sometimes in religion we want clarity, but often it is not about that, it's about the struggle. What are the core values of Quakerism that would want us to leave FUM, or to stay with FUM? For Brad, increasingly it has been to stay with them, believing that we must work with ourselves and the others we condemn if we are to have an impact. He has seen changes in 8 years. "Give them time."

Michael Morfit: One of the questions occasioned by the issue of our relationship to FUM is regarding what kind of Meeting are we? Have we been complacent? Aren't we all good liberals? Why do we have to be concerned with this? Might our coziness not be sufficient? Do we need to be more active? What are your thoughts on this based on your own experiences?

Joe Izzo: There is an incredible reflection in today's reading from *Daily Readings from Quaker Writings Ancient and Modern*[*]: We as Quakers and spiritual beings want to be inclusive, but we also can't deny differences. *Everyone* has had a different experience. It doesn't matter what your race, gender, politics... We just need to learn to listen.

He thinks FUM policies are wrong and stupid, yet that he still needs to listen. We have to hear where people are coming from. As human beings we latch on to things for safety and security, like the Bible, the Koran, drugs, alcohol. It's false safety. It is what is *within*, the Spirit, that gives us safety and security.

A Friend commented that the media and public still remain resistant to letting people go beyond boundaries, to create something transcendent as reflected in coverage of Barack Obama's speaking of the "bitterness" of certain populations.

Brad Ogilvie: When people say "We are fully inclusive", his first reaction is to run. Because most people want diversity *as long as it agrees with me*. Many don't want the diversity of opinion. Quakers seek truth. We have to engage, be out there. If we're not out there, working in the world, how can we possibly know the truth?

Michael Morfit: Is there a line beyond which we cannot associate with them? (E.g., if it wasn't sexual policies but race discrimination?) Or are we bound to remain open and engaged with them as part of our community?

Brad Ogilvie: Those things have to be held in a cultural context. FUM is certainly not the only organization that has discriminatory policies. E.g., the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and others have had scandals in the news this past year or so. You need to look at these organizations' policies, too. Clearly, if they said we won't hire black people, we wouldn't associate with them. But we're in the midst of the struggle now. At some point, yes, but now is not the time.

One friend asked for clarity about the status of BYM's payment to FUM and the continuation of dialog about this policy. Another Friend recalled how BYM's representative to FUM had expressed awkwardness sitting on FUM's board while holding our payments to them in escrow.

Stephanie Koenig reminded the group that the purpose of this meeting was not to decide about our relationship with FUM, but to listen to what it's like to be gay/lesbian today.

One Friend wondered about how many people we might have attending Meeting for Worship who were wrestling with how open to be in BFM, who have questions about how receptive will people be. She doesn't want people to be suffering silently in our Meeting about issues that are fundamental in their life. But we haven't provided many opportunities to let people know they are welcome and accepted. People may come who want a deeper connection, and yet be fearful.

Another Friend pointed out that while we have talked about diversity around race, gender orientation, and so forth, are we willing to accept diversity around theological interpretations (e.g., Conservative)? He pointed out past objections to language we've heard in Meeting for Worship. He encouraged us to open our minds to the many dimensions of difference.

Another Friend told about her older brother who at the age of 10 was gang raped at a private boys' school. The headmaster said it was his fault. Others in the family, even their father and mother, never knew. He got married, had a family, including adopting a baby boy. When he revealed to his wife his many gay affairs outside of his marriage, she accepted it but asked him to cease. Shortly after she became seriously ill. After his wife's death, he came out to his whole family, including his adopted son. To this day none will talk to him about it. He continued in the church and now is involved with a man who keeps him steady.

This same Friend now has an 11 year old grandson who is called gay already. How do you help that child deal with the world around them?

Another Friend told of her daughter who came to realize she was gay in her late 20s, early 30s. This Friend pointed out that the discussion has been so far at a very intellectual level, and hoped we could be much more emotional. She called for us to imagine what it would be like if the main relationship in your life was condemned as immoral by your family, by your church, by the laws of your state? Passing around a photograph of a lovely family scene of her daughter reading a book to her partner and their two children, she asked, "Is this immoral?"

Brad Ogilvie shared about his marriage partner (they are separated now) who was raised Mormon. He had attempted to commit suicide when he was 25. Many have not survived the turmoil caused by the knowledge of who you are vs. the beliefs of your family and community. This has motivated Brad to work with these organizations. "I can't turn my back on you, because people will die."

How do we sit with each other? How do we work with each other? "Look, I'm not going to judge your policy. For all I know we may find out when we get to heaven that being gay *is* immoral, but in the meantime, on earth, this is what I must do to feel right. My belief in who I am allows me to be a better person on this earth than if I were to walk around hating myself." The discriminatory attitudes put youth in a position of asking do I kill myself or do I try to live as I am? It is awful to feel as if you are truly condemned for all of eternity.

Joe Izzo described a current adult class at FMW studying the world's religions. One thing that is clear to Joe is that human beings don't know what reality is. We create organizations, beliefs, etc. to hide from reality. None of us are humble enough to say we don't know what reality is. There is a chart of the various Quaker schisms on the wall that is based on each thinking they knew what is right. Let's be humble. None of us know.

About beliefs: If it helps you to be a compassionate person, a peacemaker, etc., it's probably a good belief.

One Friend described how as an activist, she has no problem working in the den of the enemy. She has done that for 40 years. She is now in her mid-60s. After walking away from church, coming from the political left, she has tried many churches but didn't stay because she felt the people didn't understand her life as a woman, and ultimately as a gay woman. She doesn't know if she can be part of a spiritual community that takes an active stand that discriminates. She needs a spiritual home where she feels more affirmed than that.

Last evening, she was given an award for being the outstanding faculty at her historically black college where she is a faculty member. She shared about this award as it is a recognition of her efforts, that at every moment of her life she is committed to working with those that are different from her.

She feels very awkward, and ambivalent in her relation to this Meeting right now. This feeling is not going to go away easily. She is very close to many. Yet she is very troubled by the Meeting's passivity towards a very deeply discriminatory policy.

“If you wanted an emotional reaction, you just had mine.”

Another Friend spoke about how one of her twin daughters told her she was gay when she was ~15 (she is now 40). Our Friend's first reaction was to be frightened for her daughter. (It was a different era 25 years ago.) Then she felt waves of pain about her daughter's potential. She was afraid that people would look at her child and see her as immoral, that she would be hurt. She found it painful and difficult to accept her daughter's relationship back then; she turned to a few people in Meeting, but kept it private. Fortunately, her husband and family handled it well.

A Friend spoke of his desire make a distinction between people and policies and actions (and whether we disagree or not with them). We can't shut the people out, but we can take a very strong stand against the policy.

Brad Ogilvie never had a doubt that his (dual affiliated) Meeting welcomed and affirmed him. He also learned to appreciate that if those of us who don't agree with the policy shut the door, the policy is likely to remain and others will continue to get hurt.

Joe Izzo wanted to let everyone know that he and Brad are doing separate workshops at Yearly Meeting on how to keep the dialog open and going and to encourage people to attend.

Stephanie Koenig hopes everyone's experience here is heard and respected. She hopes we can open up to others with care and understanding as we grapple with this issue. Are there any people or issues that have not been heard?

A Friend described the experience a former AFSC'er who had been in Kenya at the time of the recent violence. While at an FWCC meeting in England, she had a conversation with the superintendent of Nairobi YM who shared that [East African Friends] have this misperception of BYM as being forceful and not being understanding of them. He was unaware of research about the genetic component of being gay, and asked more liberal Friends to give Kenya time.

Tom Lippert: Bishop Tutu said, "Love your enemies. It ruins their reputations."

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* - *Daily Readings from Quaker Writings Ancient and Modern* by Linda Hill Renfer (Editor);
Daily Readings From Quaker Writings Ancient & Modern, Vol. II, by Linda H. Renfer (Editor).