

GROWING TOGETHER

Friends, the AFSC, and the Possibility of Prophetic Service

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A Reflection Offered at the
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AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

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Friends are not fond of rigidity in spiritual matters. Our faith experience does not resemble the clinging to a shrine so much as it does a pilgrimage, a journey. Nor is Quakerism a religion of individualism. We undertake this pilgrimage together, not alone, trusting that the Holy Spirit shows the way forward to a truly gathered community.

Times change and conditions change. Moreover, we know that God's Truth is always somewhat beyond our secure apprehension, and beyond the power of our words adequately to define or describe. So it is right that we look anew at what we are doing and how we are living to see if new Light can show a better way forward. We re-examine not only our grand overall purposes, but we also look at the nooks and crannies of our lives, at the way we do business on a day-to-day basis.

Thus, it is fitting that the American Friends Service Committee re-examine itself periodically, and that this re-examination should include not only its overall mission but also the organizational structures and decision-making processes through which policies and programs expressing the mission are developed. Such a major review, and the reorganization and restructuring which flows out of it, has been effected over the past two years. One of these adjustments, in particular, has finally been approved at this meeting after of years of threshing; we have seen the way open to appointing as full-participating members of our National Board of Directors all division and regional clerks, even though in some instances these individuals may not be members of the Religious Society of Friends.

But, even though as Friends we do not value rigidity and seek a continuing revelation, it does not follow that we are rootless. The AFSC, in particular, cannot

hope to carry out a prophetic office -- that is, it cannot hope to serve as a place where the Divine Will is affirmed through work for peace and justice in human affairs -- unless we are rooted in eternal things. In other words, the prophetic office requires of us that we keep one foot in eternity and the other foot in the particular circumstances of our time and place. George Fox, in response to the great mystical openings which he had experienced, said that he had discovered a Truth which "was before the world was." At the same time, Fox was able to imbue this Truth with a power and a relevance because he was resilient enough to understand the needs and conditions of his time and to speak in its particular idiom.

Carrying out a prophetic office is not necessarily easy or natural. After all, if doing things that are easy and natural made everything come out for the best, there really would be no injustice in human society. From what we see about us, the human condition is in a fallen state. So, the first thing we can say about the prophetic office is that some special awareness is involved in carrying it out, some willingness to go beyond the world's business as usual. Those hoping to carry out a prophetic office must look to a continuous process of growth within themselves: growth both in their grasp of and responsiveness to Eternal Truth which, as has been said, always eludes both the ability of our language to pin down and the limitations of our spirits to grasp fully; and growth in our understanding of the circumstances and needs which surround us.

Now that we have accomplished so much in terms of revising and changing the AFSC, including changing the composition of the Board of Directors in very limited ways, it might be useful to reflect upon three abiding principles which must undergird any organizational structure we may wish to devise for the AFSC or any planning process we may seek to carry out.

The first principle is that essential to the growth and change which we must cultivate among ourselves in order faithfully to carry out a prophetic office is an

authentic dialogical process within our faith community. In AFSC terms, this means, particularly, that we must have healthy communication spanning the breadth of our fellowship, from workers in the field to members of the worshipping community in meetings back home whose efforts are responsible for making the field work possible. This is a dialogical process between the flower and the roots, if you will.

Now in thinking of an extensive dialogical process which embraces both a field worker in Africa or Asia and members of the worshipping community back in California or Iowa, we must be careful not to assume too neat a division of labor with respect to the matter of responsiveness to current conditions and rootedness in eternal things. We should not assume, for example, that it is the worshipping community back home which provides the eternal dimension and the field workers who provide the practical insights. It might be far easier to perceive the fundamental truth of things in a prosthetics center in Vietnam, for example, than it might be from the vantage point of one living a middle-American life in Dallas. Similarly, it may be far more possible to gain practical perspective on current conditions from some distance than might be gained by those immersed in a particular situation, particularly if it is an extreme or tragic situation.

But what we can assert with confidence is that the authenticity of our prophetic office in the American Friends Service Committee absolutely requires a healthy dialogical process which spans the breadth of our fellowship, with every participant in this process taking every other one very seriously. Perhaps I could employ some caricatures just to make a point. It would not be a healthy situation, for example, if Friends back home, when they saw visiting AFSC staff members approaching, thought to themselves, "Here come these secularized, professionalized people out to undermine our precious Quaker values from within." Nor would it do if AFSC staff members found themselves wondering how they will ever elicit from the unsophisticated hinterlands an enthusiasm for lesbian/gay liberation! Obviously, as I have said, these are caricatures and exaggerations, but they are offered in the spirit

of encouraging us to attend to the nuances which favor the spiritual health of this dialogic process. This process demands deep listening and plain speaking on all sides. It will often be a strenuous and difficult process, but we must learn to love the adventure that it represents! We must proceed prepared to exercise great patience and armed with a deep conviction that this dialogic process is absolutely essential for the development of an authentic prophetic witness in the spirit of Friends.

The second thing which we must keep in mind as we consider various possible ways to organize the life and work of the American Friends Service Committee is the matter of the locus of decision-making. Decision-making in Quaker organizations should always occur in lay committees to which staff report and are held accountable. The dialogic process about which I spoke earlier and which engages people throughout the breadth of the constituencies involved, in one way or another, with AFSC work, including workers in the field and Friends in meeting back home, is not to be confused with the actual governing bodies of AFSC. This intense dialogic process provides an *illuminating context* for the carrying out of decision-making according to the good order of Friends in duly nominated lay bodies which conduct meetings for business in the spirit of worship. Friends have always been alert to the dangers of a professionalized, ecclesial class "instructing" the laity about what is best. We must always avoid the dangers of the hireling ministry. We must especially avoid either the appearance or the reality that the resources of money gathered in the name of Friends, and the human energy of staff released with these resources, are being used by staff simply to wear out or wear down the lay bodies, which by nature are comprised of people whose time for AFSC deliberations is salvaged only with difficulty from their need to gain a livelihood and carry out their family responsibilities.

There is also a secular reason why we should exercise great care and sensitivity to be sure that decision-making genuinely occurs in lay bodies. For we share with the larger secular society around us the important understanding that

when funds are collected from a large and scattered public it is important that the oversight of the expenditure of these funds be the responsibility of groups of people who do not stand to profit or gain personally from their connection to the endeavor. Although we may occasionally make disparaging remarks about our By-Laws filed with the State of Pennsylvania, we must be clear that we do, indeed, believe in these By-Laws, and we believe in the annual testimony we make to the government that our Board of Directors is comprised of people who manage the affairs of the organization and who do not personally profit from its activities. Friends may disagree with governments, and we often do, but our testimony of veracity is a firm one and we certainly do not lie to governments, save in such extreme circumstances as is involved with operating something like an underground railroad. There are important principles of social ethics which require that when money is collected from a widely scattered public the staff not seem to "own" the enterprise but that, in the end, all significant actions and policies regarding the use of the resources are approved by disinvested lay bodies, bodies comprised of non-salaried people.

The third factor which must be kept clearly in view in the task of maintaining the vitality of AFSC's relationship to its Quaker roots has to do with the quality of our deliberative processes, and particularly with our faithfulness to the principle that key decisions are made in meetings which are meetings for worship with a concern for business. For no endeavor can claim to be authentically Quaker when deliberations and decisions, both small and large, are not made in the context of worship, in the context of seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit. Our faithfulness in carrying out this process has a significance, I believe, far beyond the life of the AFSC or the Religious Society of Friends.

Consider the modern dilemma: everywhere we see societies in various states of disintegration, including our own. Some people have even spoken of "culture wars" here in the United States. What has happened to the commonly held expectation underlying our own Constitution -- the expectation that reasonable people, after a

period of respectful discussion, will come to an agreement about the issues and concerns which affect their lives? Yet, the problem underlying all the various culture wars which we see around us, both domestically and abroad, is that this faith in rational discussion simply is not bearing fruit. What is the reason for this?

The problem, it seems to me, is that moral and spiritual claims, unlike factual claims, cannot be proven by testable hypotheses. Our rationalistic culture leads us to expect that truth is the product of logical reasoning. When we are dealing with intermediate truths or detailed truths, which rest on more fundamental premises, logical reasoning can indeed be of service, even in the moral and spiritual fields. But the model breaks down when we try to establish the fundamental premises themselves. Logic and rationalism is a way of getting to conclusions from premises; by its very nature logical argument cannot justify the premises upon which it rests. There is no way to justify through logic the ultimate starting point for moral and spiritual reasoning. The rational and enlightened founders of our Republic recognized this when they declared: "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ." and then proceeded simply to announce the starting point of their thinking.

The reason why we are surrounded by an ethical chaos which has come to be called a "culture war" is that there are so many people who begin their moral reasoning from rival but incommensurable first premises, and we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one against another.

In order to have intelligent discourse about moral and social issues, we must begin from some un-premised first premises which can come to us only from God. I believe that in our deliberative processes, in our meeting for worship with the concern for business, Friends are carrying out a practice which is of far more significance than its being a picturesque habit of a small and marginalized religious sect. For we have developed a practice which holds out the hope that we can discover again together the principles of meaning which are at the foundation both of our

individual lives and of our task of civilization-building as communities. It is not a magic process or an easy process, but it is one which does permit human destiny to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Yet, these meetings for worship with a concern for business are very special in nature. They combine a commitment to getting all perspectives out on the table for deep reflection without the flavor and characteristics of conflict-laden or debate-like atmospheres. Furthermore, they combine thorough exploration of all possibilities with a discipline of inner silence, of listening for the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Although this is a practice which is potentially available to many people, it is not a practice which is easy to do or which can be learned in an instant. Even people who may be well-seasoned Friends can require long practice before they can correctly sense the difference between a conclusion to a discussion which is merely a well-meaning contrivance of human beings, and one where these have been transcended by a "covered" condition in which the Holy Spirit is fully present. Furthermore, not only does this require the development of a sensitivity which can come only with time, but it also requires the development of personal disciplines, so that people participating in the process do so in a way different from their approach to a New England town meeting or a debate in Parliament or in Congress.

As has been indicated, none of this is necessarily transparent or easy. The Religious Society of Friends is the only place I know of in today's world where people can receive a tutelage in this process of seeking unity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, however faltering and imperfect Friends may be in their effort to be faithful to this practice which is so close to the basis of our faith. While it is certainly right and good and necessary that the American Friends Service Committee draw people of many faiths and backgrounds into its work, we must look to the members of the Religious Society of Friends who are in this mix to perform an authenticating office in terms of the meeting for worship with a concern for business. In today's world it

is only in the Society of Friends that people have the chance to be cultivated into and to be sensitized to the disciplines and the consciousness which this practice requires.

But, this also brings with it a dilemma. For it is an embarrassing and dismaying fact that the Religious Society of Friends simply does not incorporate within it the diversity of people who are needed in AFSC if its work is going to have authenticity. I tend not to accept the simplistic reasons that are often advanced for this lack of diversity in the Religious Society of Friends; in fact, this is far too complicated a matter to enter into here. Suffice it to say, that this relatively homogenous character of the Religious Society of Friends does leave us with a dilemma, a dilemma we have tried to address this weekend in changing the way the Board is composed.

I believe that we have come to see that, while we need to maintain this rootedness in the faithful practice of conducting meetings for worship with a concern for business, we now have to begin to regard the AFSC itself, in addition to the Religious Society of Friends, as a source of the necessary cultivation and practice which we seek. This change in structure ought not to mean that the AFSC is less Quakerly, but that we are more conscientious than ever in remaining faithful to Quaker practice because it is the AFSC itself which must become a training ground for it.

It is the full-hearted support of all AFSCers -- committee members, staff members in all programs and offices, Board members, and Friends in meetings -- which will make this great endeavor come to fruition in a truly prophetic work of service. But obviously those of us who serve on the Corporation are at a critical nexus in terms of all the balances which must be struck. We must take it as a special responsibility to nourish a vigorous dialogue, characterized by plain speaking and deep listening on all sides, which will provide an illuminating context for AFSC governance and decision-making. We must take care to uphold the principle that

decision-making should take place in meetings for worship with a concern for business conducted in lay bodies. Our own faithfulness to the practices and disciplines which support the possibility of truly gathered meetings for worship with a concern for business should establish a model which inspires and engages the whole of the AFSC. These practices can build up an AFSC the authentic witness of which is liberated from any enslavement to fads and fashions, to the merely trendy. For to the extent that we are rooted in something greater than we are, we are preserved from being swept away by something which is less than we are.

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