

Report from the
Quaker Religious Education Collaborative (QREC) Steering Group
August 2015

The Quaker RE Collaborative is now sixteen-months old. We continue to listen for and live into our leading to support life-long Quaker spiritual formation by gathering those doing this work into a community of practice. Our circle includes 163 Friends spanning 18 yearly meetings. We experience a dynamic interplay between keen local perspectives on resources needed and challenges faced, on the one hand, and the gifts of deep wisdom and long experience in our broad community of practice, on the other. Together they give us a grounded context for understanding patterns of change and new growth. All of that paired with contemporary skills has created a circle of Friends that can both envision a bright future for Quaker religious education and one generative enough to hammer out new resources to build it.

During the year, our worth and work has been affirmed by New England Yearly Meeting and especially Noah Baker Merrill, the Yearly Meeting Secretary, South Central Yearly Meeting who serve as our fiscal agent, the Obadiah Brown Benevolent Fund which supplied financial support for this conference, and the Releasing Ministries Alliance initiative. We began the year using a corner of the NEYM website and their virtual conferencing software—GoToMeeting. We end the year with our own website and a separate GoToMeeting account provided by a member of our Steering Group. We, in turn, re-affirm our cross-branch invitation and the life we find in that. We learned again and again that the closer we come to each other, even across a wide geography, the closer we come to God.

Since we last gathered at Pendle Hill, the Steering Group has met 33 times via GoToMeeting. In fall 2014, we reached out to yearly meetings with a press release about last year's gathering. We now have Gmail and Twitter accounts and a Facebook page. An e-newsletter, *Connections*, was created and distributed quarterly. Our next priorities may include assembling a curriculum library on the website.

In January 2015, we became aware of rising questions around welcoming newcomers into our meetings. We experimented with a series of three Conversation Circles—one on Welcoming Families, one on Welcoming Young Adult Friends, and one on the special case of Welcoming in Large Meetings with Many Visitors Each Week. These first three Conversation Circles were very successful, and notes from the discussions are posted on the QREC website for sharing. A list of suggested topics emerged from these first conversations, and we plan to schedule a new series in the fall.

In the spring of 2015, we exercised leadership engaging *Friends Journal* and their *QuakerSpeak* project in a discussion about Quaker religious education voices and perspectives they could usefully weave into their video series.

This year, the steering group's work included becoming clearer about our leading and giving voice to that in a mission statement.ⁱ We came to see and sense a responsibility to take an active role building our circle. We felt called to invite younger adult Friends into our community of practice. We experienced a similar call to intentionally build our geographic and theological span.

Even closer to the heart, we came to sense a call of conscience to focus and live into racial inclusivity. A small British booklet for children called *Quaker Meeting and Me* riveted our attention on the lack of diversity among Friends in the U.S. Lovely though the drawings were, they proved unusable because they didn't include any African American children. A piece of the pedagogy of Faith & Play™ became our mantra, "Every child has to be able to find themselves in the story."

This concern gained momentum as we conducted informal surveys of First Day School teachers about what they were teaching. We couldn't find any Friend teaching racial justice in a sustained way in First Day School. We felt almost searched by the Light. We were clearly being called beyond what seemed an unacknowledged, and perhaps unconscious, collective silence.

The author/illustrator, Rebecca Price, has given us a price quote for creating new inclusive drawings and we hope to pursue re-publishing *Quaker Meeting and Me*. As this conversation unfolded, we asked ourselves again and again, "How can we weave undoing racism into our work with Quaker children, youth, and families?"

Three illustrative moments give a window into our journey this year. In April, the co-clerk of Concord (NH) Meeting reached out to Beth Collea with a question from a parent in her meeting. A classmate of the woman's 6-year old daughter informed her that "Quakerism is a bad religion." "What should she say to counter this?" she wondered. I offered some first thoughts and brought the question to the Steering Group. The Friend received a substantive email from Melinda Wenner Bradley, suggesting resources. Liz Yeats was in England at the time at the annual Quakers Uniting in Publications conference. She was staying with a former colleague whose wife happens to be Gretchen Castle, Executive Secretary of Friends World Committee for Consultation. Gretchen was visiting Ramallah Friends School and when she skyped home, Liz relayed the Concord Friend's question. Gretchen sensed a broader concern and suggested that a children's book on Quakerism be crafted to help children understand their own tradition better. Through the agency of the Collaborative, within 24 hours, the Concord mother's question traveled halfway around the world, generated responses from her wider circle of Friends, and became the impetus for a new book! Such are the speed and span of Collaborative connections.

This spring the Collaborative became clear to approach FWCC-Section of the Americas requesting affiliation. In a time of significant restructuring in response to financial challenges, they had already become clear not to accept any affiliate groups.

The QREC, like other vital Quaker religious education ministries, finds itself in search of an institutional home. The simple existence of QREC has drawn other Quaker religious education ministries to us. Looking at the contemporary Quaker world, we can see that tectonic shifts in Quaker organizations have left much Quaker RE work unsupported and without the benefit of effective care and stewardship. The Quaker Parenting Initiative, the Faith & Play™ Working Group and the Faith & Play™ diffusion into Central and South America are doing fruitful work and have momentum but seek institutional grounding commensurate with their reach and purpose.

We, and the other RE initiatives, are truly new wine in search of new wine skins. We bring before our 2nd annual meeting the question of forming a non-profit, 501c(3) to create an institutional home for ourselves and other Quaker RE work.

A third illustrative moment lifts up the fruitfulness of our Collaborative circle. With a keen sense of the needs in local meetings, we were able to pair a need for high quality materials for Quaker families with a short paper written recently by Melinda Wenner Bradley. It seemed so clear to us it should be in wide circulation that the QREC is pleased to announce its first publication, *Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives: A Journey of Spirit and Wonder*.

It has been a joy-filled, exciting and almost “covered” first year. It seems we may be on the edge of a new horizon. As we look ahead, we hope and expect that in the next year:

- More work will be shared, published and/or posted on the web.
- Interest Groups will form into Working Groups and use GoToMeeting and freeconferencecall.com to live into their leadings despite the distances.
- Creation of a shared “Work Bench” with templates and sample documents as well as production guidance to encourage the local production of pieces with customized contact information and just the right theological voice and tone. These might be outreach tools, welcome documents for families, and RE lesson templates.
- We will offer simple, clear guidance on how to use and share core pieces and documents in a way that honors the original author and celebrates the subsequent improvements and revisions.
- Explore possible funding to prepare new illustrations for *Quaker Meeting and Me* and republish it for US Friends. Determine the print quantity based on interest and pre-publication commitments from yearly meetings. The text may be altered to include Spanish as well as English.
- Creation of a series of short “RE training” videos. Topics might include supporting children’s spirituality, how to prepare to welcome families when you don’t have children in your meeting, crafting 45-minute lessons for FDS and how to intentionally review RE materials for racial bias.

- Finally, we hope the Collaborative will meet next year in a new location. We seek Friends interested in working with the steering group to bring the 2016 Meeting of the Quaker RE Collaborative to their neighborhood.

Special thanks to Terry SoRelle, an Austin Friend, who engineered our website. We express our deep gratitude to the Obadiah Brown Benevolent Fund for underwriting our childcare, providing travel support, and scholarship funds for our Pendle Hill conference. Finally, we lift up the critical role of South Central Yearly Meeting and treasurer, Bill Wilkinson, who served as our fiscal agent enabling us to receive grant monies.

Respectfully submitted,

QREC Steering Group

Beth Collea, Wellesley Monthly Meeting, NEYM

Marsha Holliday, Friends Meeting of Washington, BYM

Melinda Wenner Bradley, West Chester Friends Meeting, PhYM

Liz Yeats, Friends Meeting of Austin, SCYM

ⁱ The Quaker Religious Education Collaborative (QREC) is a grassroots network of Friends holding a sense of stewardship for life-long Quaker faith formation through religious education. We include Friends from all branches of our international Quaker family. We welcome all Friends involved in religious education: First Day School teachers, Adult RE facilitators, religious education committee members, parents, caregivers and others. Join us in forming a community of practice to share resources, skills, gifts, questions and insights, and to support each other in the ministry of Quaker faith formation.