

QREC Conversation Circle: *Welcoming Families*, February 19, 2015

Beth Collea	Wellesley, MA
Martha Willis	Nashville
Frederick Martin	Cambridge, MA
Anne Payson	Portland, ME
Sue Rockwood	Midcoast, ME
Gail Fletcher	Norman, OK
Liz Yeats	Austin, TX
Mary Snyder	Minnesota
Harriet Heath	Winter Harbor, ME
Marsha Holliday	Washington D.C.
Melinda Wenner Bradley	Oyster Bay NY

Queries to consider:

1. *Are there ways that your ministry of welcome and engagement of families is working particularly well?*
2. *Can you name areas of this work where you are struggling as a Meeting?*

Introductions:

Beth Collea – Wellesley Friends Meeting, NEYM Religious Education and Outreach Coordinator

Marsha Holliday – Friends Meeting Washington (DC), 100-120 at MFW on Sundays, resurgence in children

Liz Yeats – Friends Meeting of Austin, about 60-80 at MFW, about 15 young people between high school and littles; littles and families have been growing, new programs to work on that support for families and RE for small children

Harriet Heath – home meeting Radnor MM in PhYM, currently in small worship group of about 8 who meets every other week (Winter Harbor Worship Group, informally)

Frederick Martin – actually member of Monadnock Meeting; FDS coordinator for FM of Cambridge, 300-400 members, MFW has about 80-100; average attendance 25 at FDS in past year (more with high school)

Anne Payson – Youth Religious Ed Coordinator, Portland Friends Meeting (ME) Vital, active, over 100 members, average 60 MFW, FDS about 20 families active
Question re: meeting connection with Friends school (Beth asked to hold that question)

Gail Fletcher – Norman Friends Meeting in Norman OK; 15-20 MFW, FDS running once a month and moving to twice a month with 6 children

Sue Rockwood – Midcoast Friends Meeting – 20-25 people MFW per week; once a month FDS program Sue created, structured once a month for four months – 9 kids. The Meeting is working to be welcoming to families since a few are beginning to attend.

Melinda Wenner Bradley – member of West Chester MM (PhYM); attender Matinecock MM (NYYM). Moved from growing meeting and children’s program to very small meeting where FDS happening once a month.

Martha Willis – Nashville Friends Meeting has three age-groups: Littles (hired help as well as volunteers; Middles (ages 4-9) work with Godly Play and Faith & Play; Youth (MS/HS – lower numbers); have several young families, working on building relationships with young families, but have stronger outreach as a meeting.

FIRST QUERY RESPONSES:

Anne – if visiting family shows up, they get Anne and she explains ages/classes/program – feels like doing a good job of welcoming families. Outside door of meeting room basket with books, stuffed animals, etc. NOT always successful getting information from families so can follow up, bring them back, make them feel welcome enough that they want to come back and meeting can be in touch with them.

Harriet – her major work in serving families has been parenting discussion groups, look at Quakerism and how it can strengthen family life, parents who take part in this tend to stay in the meeting and become more involved in Quaker RE. Had a strong program at Radnor. Quaker Parenting Initiative website www.quakerparenting.org RE can happen First Day morning, but if it’s going on at home parents can support more closely.

Beth mentioned helping Concord MM to seed second-hour programs for parents, supporting parents.

Important CONNECTION between supporting parents and them staying in meeting communities.

Marsha – Issue with sex offender attending at FMW, community has struggled with child safety issues. Lost 12 families the year this person arrived – but have worked carefully on child safety at meeting; new routines and accountability in place. Sign-ins, etc. Kids give announcements of what they did during FDS at rise of meeting. Policy changes, follow safety plan. Getting larger FDS – growing again.

Gail – don’t have own space, have to work with what they have; PARENT request to have FDS more than once a month – but asking a lot of the two individuals doing it. A parent agreed to help. Need to work on devising curriculum for the whole next year. Intention to meet and develop for the year, so can encourage others to jump in and help with FDS .

Liz – She went into the space with youngest children and created a program. Very appreciated and excitement about children coming into end of meeting. Tiny FDS committee – 3 Friends. Also have hired babysitters, which is very helpful. Tried “All-ages RE” plan – breakfast (HUGE positive response for simple breakfasts), feeling of support for parents (get to go to Meeting), program for small children in the Garden House – variety, program varies, 4 teams who each do it once a month (but flexibility in teams)

CREATING flexible “structures,” routines, varying program and making space for Friends with variety of gifts to participate and be in spiritual community with the children.

PARENTS BEING PART OF THE PROGRAM MAKES BIG DIFFERENCE

Mary Snyder – often contacted by people looking for resources; Mary’s website: discoveringourfaith.com (*I had a difficult time hearing Mary, sorry*)

Frederick – sends weekly emails to families, Wed or Fri reminding what’s happening in FDS that Sunday, what the lesson will be about, and special events. Cambridge FM also had an issue with child safety in their community many years ago, and developing a strong safety policy was likewise important for us.

Harriet – Marty Smith (PhYM) set up a system for screening people; and has knowledge of child safety issues.

Child Safety as important issue for meetings to address; need for resources and models, as well as support for one another doing this work.

Melinda – When a family with children walks in the meeting, there are three sets of needs we need to be prepared to support: the spiritual formation of the *children*, the spiritual journey of the *parents* as individual seekers drawn to Quakerism, and the *family unit* as they seek to find a spiritual community for their family to grown in and contribute to the larger life. That’s big work, and requires multiple committees of the meeting to work together (not just the work of RE/FDS) and touches on many of the pieces already lifted up: safety, communication, clear program.

Sue – We are a small meeting, who hadn’t had children attending for some time. Need to listen to families in a way that doesn’t scare them away! Parent discomfort with expectations about behavior, and concern about not scaring away families. Children may not want to go off with someone they don’t know when first visiting. Important to parents that there’s something that attracts their children and allows them to go to MFW as parents, support their own spiritual seeking. Recognizing the tensions that exist for parents with children’s behavior, etc. and dealing with those concerns has been very important, particularly in a meeting where have not been children in some time. Need to reassure parents and let them know what’s OK. Safety issues are important.

Making parents comfortable – not proselytizing, using the testimonies/SPICES. Clear structure for lessons, especially with multiage group.

Beth – About 4 years ago, Wellesley FM had shrunk to about 6 children, felt like a crisis. Reconfigured program and started exploring “All-Ages RE.” When new families visited, Beth (in her RE Coordinator role) would write a hand-written note saying thank you for coming, here’s why I think this is a great place, and lifted up an upcoming event like parenting conversation (always a party/social event to invite people to at WFM!). Families who went on meeting retreat together were bonded to the meeting.

Also: Give new parents a small job (“put everyone to work”) – not being on a committee, but for a newcomer you might wait 6-8 weeks and then give them something they can meaningfully do, and create that feeling that they are of value in a place. Give them a role to play.

Additional 15 minutes of open conversation:

Martha – lifted up themes she heard: safety, security, structure for community building

Anne – one thing their YRE committee is creating is a postcard to give to new/visiting families, will share with this group when done. Information about children’s program structure and a contact person. There is a Friends school in their area – annual invitation to school families to come to meeting, this would be something to hand to them.

Liz – Was recently worried that she had scared away visiting parents but picked up the phone and reached out to them, happily. Handouts/postcards are good, but also **GOING UP TO PEOPLE AND SAYING HELLO, reaching out – the meeting is a family.**

Mary – lifted up question about QREC being a place where ideas and resources can live? (*again, I apologize but I had a hard time hearing the connection with Mary and welcome edits or additions here*)

Working on QREC website, page on NEYM site is a placeholder to start. Trying to build a national and international community of practice.

Sue – Need resources for Quaker Educators – would love a source of clearinghouse where Quaker religious educators could go and hear more about what works and why. Things like Responsive Classroom resonate with us as Friends, but need to discuss why?

Ended our time with a period of grateful worship.

Themes that seemed to emerge in this Conversation Circle:

- *Being ready to welcome people at the meetinghouse threshold, reaching out and finding ways to **communicate** about what families will find there. Concrete and personal ways to provide both welcome and continued connection.*
- *The **connection** between supporting parents and their staying in meeting communities. Parents being listened to and feeling valued in the larger life of the meeting. Needs of parents and families, as well as religious education for children.*
- *Child **safety** as important issue for meetings to address; need for resources and models, as well as support for one another doing this work.*
- *Creating flexible **structure** and routines in programs; making space for Friends with variety of gifts to participate and be in spiritual community with the children.*