

## QREC Conversation Circle: *Welcoming Newcomers in Meetings*, February 23, 2015

Christen Clougherty	Savannah Friends Meeting
Beth Collea	Wellesley Friends Meeting
Christa Frintner	Friends Meeting of Cambridge
Annie Glen	FUM & Dublin Friends Meeting
Karen Greenler	Madison Friends Meeting
Cathy Guttentag	Live Oak Meeting, Houston
Marsha Holliday	Friends Meeting of Washington
Liz Yeats	Friends Meeting of Austin

Beth Collea began our conversation by asking Friends to introduce themselves and talk a bit about their concerns on welcoming visitors.

**Cathy** – She is clerk of Live Oak which has about 3 or 4 visitors every week; some are friends of those who regularly attend.

**Christa** – At Cambridge they tend to have visitors every week, frequently more than 10 a week since they are very accessible to Harvard and other universities. Many of the visitors are of college age.

**Christen** – 12-15 attending with 3-4 visitors weekly which proves difficult in such a small meeting.

**Marsha** – FMW is a big meeting with 18-20 visitors each week and a transient population. They are working on ways to help newcomers find a way into the life of their meeting. Marsha serves on Ministry and Worship Committee with a charge of welcoming newcomers.

**Karen** – lives near Madison, WI and attends Madison Monthly but is a member Iowa Yearly Meeting. Karen teaches FDS. They have two meetings each Sunday, it is a fairly big meeting and visitors come in waves, lots in the first weeks of each semester at the university. She named “Newcomer Fatigue” as a common experience.

**Annie** – Annie pastors Dublin Friends which is a member of the New Association of Friends, and works with FUM as Communications Editor.

**Cathy** – Looking for new strategies. Hoping to learn from everyone else. At Live Oak Friends they go around at the rise of every meeting for introductions and Friends are encouraged to include blessings and concerns. The acoustics are not so great and so they don’t always hear the names. Friends on the Outreach Committee make an effort to greet newcomers. They have a guestbook but no real plan for more. They always say “welcome” and hope you come back, but have no particular method, once people start attending. She raised up a question about how can we integrate new attenders into the life of the meeting. They have a gathering once a month for newcomers who have been coming, and some written materials.

**Christa** – Cambridge has experimented with a lot of different methods of welcoming over the years since they regularly have 15-20 visitors each week. They have nametags and information available, as well as a short pamphlet about Quakers and the meeting. Now they are working on a new one for visiting families to help families deal with FDS children leaving meeting after a period at the beginning of meeting. They find that not everyone rises to introduce themselves when asked by the care of worship person at the rise of meeting but they have a greeter who has some responsibility to welcome newcomers. They have a guest book. They ask visitors to fill out an information request card with 10 things they can request info about from the meeting. They ask explicitly “how did you hear about us?” Someone responds to that in a week or so by email. Newcomers are invited to a short opportunity to debrief called “After Thoughts” and someone from membership committee has care of that and attends. About 3 times a month they have meals and invite newcomers to those. Newcomers are also invited to courses. Right now they are doing a New Lights course, which is an intro to Quakerism and they recently had a panel of different Friends from meeting who told what they do in the meeting. She brought up her concern to explore “How do we keep energy going?” Cambridge is doing a lot and is now looking at supporting small groups that aren’t committees-- study groups, affinity groups, etc.

Annie asked how many Friends attend Cambridge weekly and was told there are 150-200 in two meetings.

**Beth** – likes card which allow visitors to request the information they need. The card is also on the meeting website.

**Christen** – Savannah is a small meeting that has very little in place to welcome visitors right now. There is nothing formal but they greet after close of meeting, introducing themselves and go out to lunch together. As a young couple, this was too expensive for her and her husband and that was hard. Now the meeting has changed to having coffee after worship. She finds she is learning a great deal from this conversation already.

Beth affirmed the need to be sensitive to economic differences.

**Marsha** – Friends Meeting of Washington is a very large meeting where 18-20 visitors introduce themselves during announcements. Many are young people. Ministry and Worship is proposing a ½ hour meeting a month with newcomers at which there will be a topic of the day like testimonies and an informational packet that will include such things as who could you contact about more education. They are looking into using nametags in different colors designating people available to answer questions after meeting. It is easy to let people escape without greeting.

Someone suggested we share information about how various meetings store nametags, maybe using pictures.

**Karen** – Since she teaches FDS she is not there at end of meeting. Their FDS coordinator is tasked with explaining what is available to newcomers when they come in the door. She often helps Middle school children go to another building for their class. There are often guests coming with FDS children and so FDS Friends have become unofficial newcomer greeters. There are Friends who greet unofficially, and there is juice after meeting.

Between the two Sunday meetings, there are lots of little informal meetings about meeting business and others engage in social time. Making things go smoothly seems to take a lot of labor for the FDS coordinator and others. Things they do to integrate newcomers into the

meeting are: they have a list-serve through which they send out information and a photo wall with photos identified with names that they get updated once a year.

Others mentioned having photo walls.

Beth suggested it might be helpful to have a conversation circle for RE coordinators.

**Liz** – Everyone considers him or herself a greeter. There are so many events going on, it is hard for a newcomer to figure it all out. They print up Announcement Sheets to help with this. They don't want the verbal announcements to go on too long. They offer *Silence and Speech: For Anyone New To Quaker Worship*, a short pamphlet by Richard F. Allen. Some people read or write during meeting for worship. They have a Meeting for Eating once a month. "Food really helps." They are in an African-American neighborhood and really try to be welcoming.

**Annie** – The largest meeting she ever attended was 60 and her present meeting, which she pastors, has about 20. Her experience is that there is a problem getting people to meeting. The worship includes a lot of silence. When visitors come they welcome them. If they come back again or are willing to leave their contact information, she keeps hand-made mugs ready to give them with a little information about Quakers and tea and cocoa inside, saying "You've been mugged by Dublin Friends." She has not used the mugs as much lately and asked how do we get people to come. She emphasized that everyone is encouraged to speak during worship. She is jealous of some of our larger meetings, but after some others spoke about how large meetings have different problems, she agreed.

**Cathy** – Asked if the meeting has been written up by local paper.

**Annie** – Explained she gets some good press as she is the only female minister in the area, and as such gets to speak a lot around the area. She explains that since the beginning women have been ministers among Friends. Speaking publically and doing church services in other churches helps.

**Beth** – Wellesley has a program statement about our First Day School. It says, "this is the way we approach teaching, we do use the words God and Jesus, we work with Bible, we work with God within, etc." We hand it to new people giving them a way to tell whether we are a match for them. In addition, we have a pamphlet on safety and spiritual practice rack cards. These are pieces of information to make the transition work more smoothly.

**Liz** – Mentioned her meeting website and that most visitors who come mention it as the way they found us, though the meeting has a very public church sign where someone in meeting changes the saying irregularly.

**Cathy** – Live Oak gets lots of visitors through the website. They also attract people since their building is a James Turrell Skyspace. Cathy explained that the building has a roof that opens to the sky which people come to view at sunset on Friday nights. This gets them a lot of publicity and some people who come for the art come back on Sunday for worship.

**Karen** – She asked if others have a lot of the children from divorced families who hence attend only irregularly, sometimes every other weekend. It's hard to include them in FDS.

**Beth** – Spoke of Portland, ME Friends having FDS only 2x a month, working it so that the most children are there. This scheduling helps parents to concentrate their attendance on certain weeks when other families plan to attend.

**Christa** – Cambridge has family worship the first Sunday of the month where some meeting adults and families attend a semi-programmed meeting. This gives them programmed time together but don't need to be there more than once a month.

**Annie** – Spoke about how she had included children in worship with a visual demonstration for children to see what was happening in silent worship. She got orange colored Alka-Seltzer and spoke about how when we center we begin to be very bubbly inside demonstrating that by putting ½ of an Alka-Seltzer into the water. Then she continued to put pieces of Alka-Seltzer in until it bubbled over. One of the children said, "Wow!" and she explained this was how it was with a gathered meeting. She also told us that this Easter, two meetings in town that had separated 60 years ago are getting together, making 35-45 adults and 8 children, for a wonderful worship with an egg hunt, silent worship and a meal. She joyfully expressed she remained jealous of those of us in large meetings.

**Marsha** – Told how she loved being in a small meeting. When she didn't come to worship people called to make sure she was okay. Now no one calls and she wonders if anyone even notices when she is missing.

Some asked if any of us had done Quaker Quest with our meeting?

**Marsha** – Said she hadn't but heard it works.

**Annie** – Went to a workshop on inreach-outreach that Brent Bill led.

**Christa** – Asked how can we all learn to welcome each other, creating a culture, mood that makes it the responsibility of all in the meeting? She feels that is the way it would work best. Others agreed.

**Beth** – Spoke about having alternative days and times for meeting activities and worship.

**Marsha** – Spoke about getting away from just Sunday morning. In her meeting, they had a once a month Saturday night café for a while. Everybody had to prepare something around a set topic and had to present it to the whole group. There was potluck finger food. Children and families were included and they came! It helped grow the FDS and the participation of families.

**Beth** – Wellesley Meeting had a series of Quaker Parenting Conversations. She and others cooked Saturday night dinner and asked families to just come and share around issues important to them while the children had structured playtime with supervision. It seemed important to relieve them of the need to bring food. The conversation was very rich and it was hard to end the conversation on "Weaving the Testimonies into Our Parenting."

**Christa** – Cambridge has Sunday evening and Wednesday morning smaller worship opportunities, also and intergenerational youth group and a parent discussion group. However it has been hard to schedule in a way that meets the needs of newcomers by being consistent. This is because they try not to schedule programs when there are YM youth retreat programs in which many of the regular youth are involved or when other things are happening in their busy meeting. When she looks at the monthly calendars for the next few months she realizes it must be hard for newcomers to keep track of programs offered, as they are not at all consistent.

**Cathy** – Live Oak has an 8:30am and 10:30am Sunday worship and Wednesday night. The early meeting on Sunday and the Wednesday worship make a smaller experience possible. They used to have regular parenting potlucks but recently they have been dropped as the

group of children is getting older. Sustaining these programs is hard and maybe we have become more fluid and less regular, announcing things at rise of meeting,

Notes will be written up and be circulated back to you, if you have resources you would like to share please send them.

Beth explained QREC, why we were doing Conversation Circles and that we had already learned a lot. She opened idea that a circle could meet again if someone wanted to take on the moving it forward but the steering committee doesn't have plans in that direction at this point.

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### **Themes that seemed to emerge in this Conversation Circle:**

- The importance of a Culture of Welcome where every Friend sees him or herself as a greeter.
- In a large meeting with many visitors, members can feel Newcomer Fatigue.
- How can we make the welcoming manageable for the regular attenders and integration into a new community manageable for the newcomers?
- It is difficult for newcomers to adjust to a complicated calendar of many meeting activities. Friends Meeting at Cambridge's system of a contact information card with check boxes for choices of different e-lists seems to work well.
- Moving beyond Sunday morning in our planning creates times when it may be easier for families to attend.
- Focusing attendance for First Day School on two weeks a month may solve the impact of sporadic attendance.