

Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business
Asheville Friends Meeting
9th Month 11, 2016

Clerk: Gail Hipkins

Co-Clerk: Patti Hughes

Recording Clerk: Steve Livingston

Friends convened for our monthly Meeting for Worship With Attention To Our Meeting's Business at 12:30 p.m.

Attendance: Jim Cavener, Edie Patrick, Morgan Murray, Kristi Gjelfriend, Jim Hipkins, Gjeorge Gjelfriend, Katherine Kowal, Laura Lane, Kitti Reynolds, Soctty Utz, Sharon Smith, Adrienne Wier, Sarah Thomas, Margaret Farmer, Pat Johnson, Robin Wells, Laura Wall, Rusty Maynard, and Glenn Singer, previously from Greenville SC Meeting.

After a period of silence, Clerk opened the meeting at with a reading from AFSC's "An Introduction To Quaker Testimonies", the section on Equality (p. 7):

Equality: Seeking Social Justice

Friends hold that all people are equal and have equal access to the "inner light". This profound sense of equality leads Friends to treat each person with respect, looking for "that of God" in everyone.

This testimony was reflected in the practices of early Quakers, who granted equal spiritual authority to women, refused to use forms of address that recognized social distinctions, supported religious freedom, and worked to abolish slavery.

Clerk then read proposed language for our Meeting's yet-to-be-published handbook, adapted from this text:

Asheville Friends Meeting supports the development of societies and structures that recognize the dignity of every person. We seek to work with all people in pursuit of justice – the economically impoverished and the materially comfortable, the disenfranchised and the powerful – inviting Spirit to move among all groups, making great change possible.

We reject all forms of discrimination, whether based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, immigration status, class, gender, age, ability, or sexual orientation. We work to change the beliefs, practices, and institutions that perpetuate prejudice, and we support affected communities in seeking their own liberation and equality. We continually examine our own biases and privileges and strive to achieve greater equality in Asheville Friends Meeting, in our communities, and in our society.

Friends approved the agenda as presented.

Regarding minutes from last month's meeting for business, a Friend spoke approvingly of the Recording Clerk's wording of the minutes. The Friend found parts of the sensitive discussion concerning Sharon Smith's proposed residency at the Meetinghouse that he was easy with and other parts that he found difficult, which gave him a sense that they were in good order, given the content of the meeting.

Another Friend read remarks from Chuck Fager, well known Quaker writer and observer, pertaining to the action of six Friends standing in the way of the proposal. She united with Friend Fager's observation that it was not in good Quaker order for these Friends to be recorded as standing in the way when the meeting was not in unity with the proposal, and the fact that their action was planned in advance of the meeting showed a lack of integrity.

Clerk stated her sense that the minutes accurately reflected what happened in the meeting. The other Friend felt that the minutes should include a statement that the clerks were not acting in good order. A Friend reminded the Meeting that our usual practice is to find unity on changes, additions, or deletions, rather than to simply record that Meeting was not in unity on the minutes as presented. The Friend recalled another instance in our Meeting's history when a request was made for residency. The Meeting split into two camps, one that dismissed the idea of a "church mouse", while the other supported the practical idea of protecting the property with such a presence. He pointed out that we can always rethink sometime in the future any decision we make, and we can decide to change it. He observed that in the last Business Meeting, what he heard sounded like everyone was speaking from the heart. He did not feel the decision making process was conducted inappropriately.

Clerk asked how many Friends had read the minutes, and very few raised their hands. Co-clerk offered that since Meeting was not in unity, we should continue the discussion about the content of the minutes subsequent to the Business Meeting. She suggested that Ministry & Counsel Committee organize a called committee meeting to sit with the concerns that Friends had raised. Two Friends united with this suggestion, reiterating concern about the integrity of our process, how it affects the health and well being of the Meeting, how it might stand in the way of our being a Spirit-led faith community.

Eighth Month Minutes were referred back to Recording Clerk and Ministry and Counsel Committee to arrange an ad hoc meeting for concerned Friends.

Treasurer's Report

Treasurer's report was deferred until next month due to the absence of the Treasurer.

Racial Justice Committee

(written report)

Margaret F stated that the Committee had two requests. First, they asked that the Meeting reconsider the mission statement that the Racial Justice Committee had discerned for itself, that Meeting found it could not unite with when it was first presented over a year ago. Margaret read the statement:

To address individual, cultural and institutional white supremacy/racism within Asheville Friends Meeting, the town of Asheville and SAYMA.

A Friend shared three observations. First, that it is not appropriate for Asheville Meeting to approach SAYMA in this context. Second, it was clear from the meeting last year that several Friends were uncomfortable with the term “White Supremacy” despite its widely accepted sociological definition because of the traditional association of the term with KKK, Nazis, skinheads, and so forth. Third, while Friends may be interested in addressing their own racism, some in the Meeting are not comfortable with the focus of the mission statement on the Meeting itself, and would rather it was focused on the outward community.

A member of the Racial Justice Committee offered an analogy to baking a cake. If the ingredients are corrupt, how can we expect a good finished product? How can Friends go forward with outward work without first, or at least simultaneously, doing the inward work? This Friend sees ongoing resistance, and denial of racism in the Meeting. She recalled her experience when living in a much poorer country, getting a good look at the inward work that she needed to do. She bought a roll of chicken wire, enough for both her and a neighbor. But then she realized how her “gift” had indebted the neighbor, imposing on the neighbor, putting her in charge of what the neighbor did with the gift. This process of self reflection is what the RJC wants to guide in the Meeting.

Are we asking people of color to act like we expect them to act and leave their true selves at the door? We have the power to do so because of white supremacy. How do we relinquish our white power in order for minorities to become more empowered?

Margaret reread the mission statement, emphasized that the Committee's mission statement referred to what the Committee saw as its calling, not meant to refer to the Meeting as a whole. She pointed out that the term “white supremacy” has a specific meaning, no matter what our perceptions of it may be: our culture is based on Western European values. RJC seeks to educate the Meeting so that we learn to have this common language and learn how microaggressions affect people of color.

A Friend thanked Margaret for her well worded statement, and asked that the RJC's mission statement include not just the term but the academic definition of the term, so that all who read it would know what was meant by it.

A Friend recalled her discomfort with term “white supremacy”, but as she sat with it and worked with it in her academic setting, came to understand why there was a need for it, and the need to be open to new understanding. The Committee's addition of the

term “racism” in its mission statement helped that Friend unite wholeheartedly with the use of the term.

A Friend described himself as an “enthusiastic supporter” of the term. He was taken aback by it initially, but with personal exploration came around to understanding the need for it.

A Friend asked if the RJC would consider use of “white privilege and power” instead of “white supremacy”.

A Friend named his experience among Quakers as one of coalition building. We agree on the end result, and work together to find our way there, respecting one another's differences and finding a way that we are all comfortable with.

The Racial Justice Committee clerk reiterated that the term “white supremacy” is used interchangeably with racism because they are one and the same. “We live in a white supremacist, colonialist settler state founded on genocide, slavery, and theft,” she said. She averred that no community of color would unite with changing the language in order to allay white people's discomfort.

Recording Clerk rose from the table to inform Friends that it was at his urging that the Committee agreed to resubmit its mission statement. He affirmed his trust in the Committee's discernment process and in the authority of the Committee Clerk's years of formal education and training, and lifetime of experience, to guide Friends to the proper terminology to use in our anti-racism work. He acknowledged his own embarrassment in acknowledging that White Supremacist structures exist in our Meeting, and suggested that this was perfectly natural for all of us White folks to feel, but we can't get over the embarrassment by refusing to give the proper name to its source.

Clerk stepped away from the table to speak as a writer. She referred to the “baggage” associated with the term. She cautioned that we don't want to be associated with the kind of people that are traditionally identified as “white supremacists”. If we use that term to identify the mission of the Committee, she warned that people were likely to misunderstand. She suggested that we attach a definition to the term in the mission statement to make it more acceptable, or substitute a different term that doesn't carry so much baggage.

A Friend pointed out that “white supremacy” is more than just an academic term. The national organization Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) uses the term in the same sense that the Committee is suggesting. The Friend recalled experience of growing up with first a male head of household who was a batterer and subsequently with an emotional abuser. She compared the former with the skinhead Nazi types and the latter with us liberal White folk who mean well but commit the insidious kind of racial battering that is perhaps even more damaging because it doesn't “look” like white supremacy.

A Friend recalled the passing of Patriarchy Minute at SAYMA. It took seven years to get it done, and a lot of conversations. The Friend asked that we have the patience to work through this until we are all in unity.

A Friend recounted an adage he learned in Divinity School: “comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable.” Using the term allows us to do that with immediacy, power, and beauty. He recalled that when he encountered the term many years ago it was being used almost exclusively in an academic sense, but times have changed. Margaret added that her children's schooling included reading books by people of color about the experience of being Black in America, but as an older person, her educational experience was lacking in this background.

A Friend asked for clarification. While understanding we are revisiting the mission statement after it has been in limbo for some time, it was not clear to him why we are arguing about this term. He questioned why it wasn't obvious that it's the right term to use. He asked if there was a hidden concern that the Committee doesn't represent the Meeting kindly enough. He said he shared the concern that using the term could alienate the audience, that we cannot heal with anger. What matters more than the term is making the progress. We have made some missteps in our progress, and in our relationships concerning racism. He advocated for some expression of healing both the injured and the perpetrators to be included in the mission statement.

A Friend reminded us that it is not the responsibility of people of color to heal white people's racism. People who are already suffering the trauma of racism shouldn't be put on the spot like that. It's our responsibility as white people, as members of the oppressor class. We need to listen to their concerns, not argue with them.

The other Friend apologized if he seemed to be placing the onus on the victims.

A Friend shared his experience at age 12, he was living in an institution, and a priest came to visit. He felt the power of immense joy coming off of the priest. Turned out the priest was Desmond Tutu. He shared his experience in military basic training, going through a hard time, when another soldier came to him in a quiet moment, talked to him about how he might address his problems. He appreciated his comrade's tact and loving concern.

The Clerk of the Committee reminded Friends that white supremacy is not necessarily rooted in anger or hate, it is simply a description of the structure of our society. Racial prejudice plus institutional power, that's all there is to it, she explained.

A Friend expressed appreciation to the Committee Clerk and support for using the term, and united with the suggestion of a phrase about healing. There was a general sense that the Committee take all this in and discern how it may affect their statement of mission.

Friends approved referring the Racial Justice Committee mission statement back to the Committee, with a recommendation to clarify the meaning of the term

“white supremacy” and to add wording to refer to a goal of healing.

Margaret presented the Committee's second item. Friend Sharon Smith had submitted a statement of her ministry to Ministry & Counsel Committee last May with the intention of having it reviewed and acted upon. Co-clerk indicated that the Committee had not understood that they were being asked to take any action. Margaret clarified that the Racial Justice Committee was requesting that Ministry & Counsel Committee bring forward a recommendation to recognize Sharon's ministry.

The Clerk referred the statement back to Ministry & Counsel Committee for further review and action. Friends expressed appreciation for Margaret's presentation of the report of the Racial Justice Committee.

Closing worship

There being no further business, meeting adjourned with silence at 1:30 p.m.