Fight the Symptoms or Cure the Disease? Letter and Endorsement

A little over a year ago, New York Yearly Meeting took up discernment of a "Draft Statement on Becoming an Anti-Racist Faith Community." Though its authors were unknown and it did not arise from any committee, the statement was fast-tracked to the floor of business meeting at Summer Sessions, where it was agreed that we would engage in a yearly meeting-wide discernment process. Though the discernment process never materialized, a webpage dedicated to the Draft Statement was launched, it was routinely published in the our online newsletter, and discussion sessions were created - not to discern whether the yearly meeting should adopt the draft statement, but to share our reactions to it and how we could incorporate into our faith lives as Friends. Effectively, the statement, though nominally a draft, was treated as though it had been discerned and adopted. This de facto adoption of the Draft Statement continued until a group of Friends of various racial backgrounds and theologies came together over many months and discerned that integrity demanded that the process we adopted as a yearly meeting be followed. This was expressed lovingly but firmly, and repeatedly, to NYYM leadership. Eventually, the weekly promotion of the statement tapered off; the concerns expressed by NYYM Friends, both individuals and monthly meetings, were acknowledged; and work finally began on building the discernment process we approved as a yearly meeting. This discernment process is still "under construction"; I have heard nothing about when, how or if the yearly meeting will roll out the process so that we can actually engage with the statement as a body.

Then, about six months ago, another statement came before our yearly meeting, "An Urgent Call to the Religious Society of Friends." The Urgent Call was drafted by a collection of prominent Friends from yearly meetings concentrated in the northeast and disseminated throughout United States Quaker networks. It was published only a handful of weeks before our NYYM Summer Sessions; in fact, several committees donated their meeting time at summer sessions so that the Urgent Call could be considered by our yearly meeting. I was looking forward to the opportunity to discern God's will together as a worshiping body at my first in-person Summer Sessions experience, to really "do" Quakerism together, listening for the Spirit's guidance on such important issues as the future of our democracy and how we, as Friends, are called to respond to the threat it is under. Instead, I found that the Urgent Call had already been endorsed on behalf of the yearly meeting. While we were "considering" it as a yearly meeting, our discernment was not around the decision of whether to adopt the Urgent Call, but how to incorporate it into our lives. The decision of whether to adopt it was not entrusted to dozens or hundreds of NYYM Friends being led by the Spirit. Instead, it was made by two individuals. I am 100% sure that they were acting thoughtfully and prayerfully. However, they nonetheless usurped the opportunity for NYYM Friends to seek God's voice together, instead putting us in our

current position of having our yearly meeting publicly endorse a document for which unity in the Spirit was never sought and manifestly does not exist.

And now, just a few weeks ago, a "Statement on Sexual and Reproductive Services" appeared in our online newsletter, approved by Quaker Earthcare Witness. This statement, which was issued by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), condemns the Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade and states that "restricting access to...abortion, will adversely impact the health and well-being of people and their families." Quaker Earthcare Witness asks Friends meetings to issue statements supporting the IUSSP's declaration. I would prefer to set aside the tenuous connection between Earthcare and abortion, since the only relationship I can think of is using abortion as population control for the good of the environment - a horrifying thought. Many Friends, myself included, believe strongly that God and our peace testimony call us to promote and protect human life and human dignity, from the earliest stages of human development when a growing baby is hidden in the womb to natural death, however that may come. It struck me as troubling that a committee dedicated to protecting all of creation was calling on Friends to speak forcefully for the unrestricted right to abort developing humans - not by reference to traditional Quaker faith and practice, not by reference to the "cloud of witnesses," not by reference to the Bible or the early Church or even to the philosophy or sacred traditions of other faiths or cultures. No, we are being called to speak forcefully on the mysteries of life and creation on the sole weight and spiritual authority of ... the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population.

First, a document created by a group of anonymous NYYM Friends was treated as endorsed without proper corporate discernment. Then, a document created by individual Quakers from outside our yearly meeting was *actually* endorsed without *any* corporate discernment. Now, our monthly meetings are being called to "consider issuing a statement of support" for a document that, though endorsed by a Quaker group, has no recognizable Quaker content - a call made with no mention made of corporate discernment, or faithfulness, or what it means to live a life grounded in the Spirit.

I might be a "bad Friend" to quote Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond series, but I have a feeling he was onto something in Goldfinger: “Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Third time it's enemy action.” Our enemy is spiritual, not any creature of flesh and blood, but the same principle applies.

Friends, the Adversary is afoot in our yearly meeting and is using the cover of these essential, emotional and timely issues to seduce us away from our one true Love - the Spirit of God who is always present to comfort and always ready to guide. The Deceiver cries, "Urgent! Disaster is coming! There is no time for the niceties of Quaker

process - we must act now!" But “Quaker process” isn’t an exercise in bureaucratic box-checking. Quaker process is listening for the voice of God together, the very foundation of our faith. What use is it to be antiracist if we become anti-Spirit along the way? What have we gained by saving democracy if in doing so we abandon the Kingdom of Heaven? What victory do we win in condemning the actions of the Supreme Court if, by acting in our own will and way rather than walking in the Light of Christ, we condemn ourselves in the process?

Each one of these outwardly unrelated happenings is a symptom of the same disease - a reliance on our own judgment and priorities rather than on divine guidance. I no longer have the energy to battle symptoms, but it is more urgent than ever that we fight the underlying disease, because without a cure, we are lost. The stream of "statements" and "calls" and "declarations" will continue, and our yearly meeting will continue to embrace them, until and unless we return the Source of all our power and strength. Without that Source, we will continue running after every issue that grabs our attention, flitting in turn to every cause, faithful to none of them - because none of them will be seasoned and embraced with the conviction that only comes from knowing that God has called us and we have no choice but to follow.

In love,
Adria Gulizia

We the undersigned Friends unite with the concerns raised in Adria's letter. We further believe that these concerns are of critical importance to our Yearly Meeting, as well as to the wider Religious Society of Friends. We endorse this letter with the hope that other Friends may also endorse it, if so led. We encourage and will support a called meeting for discernment, open to the entire Yearly Meeting, to labor with the concerns and issues so clearly articulated in this letter.

Stuart Bartram (Rochester Meeting)
Barbrah Bleecker (Montclair Meeting)
David Barnard (Albany Meeting)
Don Badgley (Poughkeepsie Meeting)
Herb Lape (Westbury Meeting)
Lauren Scott (Westbury Meeting)
Lee Rada (Morningside Meeting)
Rebecca Schillenback (Poplar Ridge Meeting)
Rene Lape (Westbury Meeting)
Marissa Badgley

Mary Pagurelias (Brooklyn Meeting)