

Rationale for the Illinois Yearly Meeting Effort to Write a Faith and Practice

The Faith and Practice Committee of Illinois Yearly Meeting received a request from the Continuing Committee via a letter from IYM Clerk, Margaret Katranides, March 3, 2003. The relevant passage is as follows: "...we thought it might be useful to publish a thumbnail history of IYM experience with books of discipline, and a rationale for the current decade-plus effort...." A thumbnail history has been prepared by the Faith and Practice Committee and is being made available together with this "rationale." This rationale is structured by three questions.

1. What functions does a yearly meeting's book of faith and practice serve for that yearly meeting?

A book of "faith and practice" typically serves many functions for a yearly meeting. These include, among others, guidance for handling special occasions; information for seekers as to who the Friends are, especially Friends within the Yearly Meeting which adopted the faith and practice book; guidance for groups in the process of becoming monthly meetings; and practical directions in situations where a meeting is faced with doing something quickly and/or publicly as in the case of memorial services and weddings. Such a book serves as an educational resource not only for young Friends and new Friends but also for all who want to grow deeper. In addition, a book of faith and practice provides a connection among Friends and among meetings. It is an expression of the faith of the members of the yearly meeting and of how they endeavor to express this faith in their practice. A yearly meeting's book of faith and practice is an expression of its identity during the period it is in use.

2. What are the differences between a book of faith and practice and the Illinois Yearly Meeting Handbook?

The Handbook includes descriptions of the committees and officers of the Yearly Meeting and their duties. It is a descriptive document intended to be useful to those considering accepting nominations and for those newly named to positions or committees. The Handbook is not intended for, nor does it satisfy, the functions listed above for a book of faith and practice. As it happens, the current Illinois Yearly Meeting handbook gives guidance on how a group becomes a meeting. This guidance would probably be better placed in a book of faith and practice. The Handbook is neither comprehensive nor concerned to articulate general principles underlying Quaker faith and practice, but is instead concerned to describe in very brief compass details of current IYM structure and practice.

3. Why should Illinois Yearly Meeting produce its own faith and practice book?

Given the value that we place on participation, integrity demands that we participate in the shaping of our own practices and in the expression of our faith rather than yielding to Friends in another yearly meeting the responsibility for decisions which a book of faith and practice reflects, a yearly meeting in which we have no part and whose members were not thinking of our situation in their deliberations. The spiritual work of coming into unity on an articulation of our own faith, structure, general procedures, and identity is of intrinsic value; however similar the result of our

own discernment process to that of other yearly meetings, we are mindful of the ancient Quaker challenge, “What canst thou say?” Apart from the demands of integrity and authenticity, our meetings are widely scattered and many are small, making structure designed in a region where Quakers are “thicker on the ground” less relevant here. Thus books of faith and practice written for more geographically compact and demographically larger yearly meetings tend not to fit our situation very well. A further consideration is that yearly meetings’ books of faith and practice are periodically revised. As we have found, adopting another yearly meeting’s book of faith and practice leaves us subject to their revision schedule. It is not just that the books are revised on schedules not of our choosing; changes in content may be made which we might not have been led to make. Conversely, changes may not have been made that we might be led to have made, had we been writing our own revision. Indeed, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s Faith and Practice has changed since 1955 as a result of changes within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and, more importantly, through careful spiritual labor that we have not participated in or done on our own. The other possibility might occur as well, namely, that Illinois Yearly Meeting may work through an issue with deep spiritual labor that has not yet been done by another yearly meeting.

The spiritual growth of a yearly meeting as a religious community often requires the prayerful labor to come into unity in God, not the avoidance of such labor. In this respect, the effort to find an expression of faith and practice with which the whole yearly meeting can unite is an important and ongoing process. A book of faith and practice is not so much the conclusion of such a process, but a milestone along the way.