

Illinois Yearly Meeting Field Secretary Report

March 2011

My work over the last half year has concentrated on service to two of the more needful constituencies of the yearly meeting: our smaller meetings and our spiritual nurturers.

We are aware of the problems facing our small meetings. They often feel isolated, alone, and barely holding on. When spiritual opportunities are offered, they come at a distance and at a cost in time and money that frequently seems excessive. While larger meetings can pool resources to achieve their goals, small meetings don't have the option.

We are less aware of the degree to which we fail our spiritual nurturers. Too often, we accept their contributions to our meetings and ourselves without recognizing the costs they bear on our behalf. And, to be fair, we are partially ignorant because they are not likely to complain – until they have crossed the line and withdraw entirely, sometimes for a period of rest, too often for good.

These needs multiply for the nurturers in small meetings, where they are unlikely to have others to lean on and share the burdens with. As a result, nurturers in small meetings are more likely to burn out. Moreover, these small meetings, who need them the most, suffer the most for their loss.

Historically, there were Meetings of Ministers and Elders at the quarterly meeting and yearly meeting levels. These meetings encouraged interconnections between nurturers in the various meetings. They gathered several times each year for worship and fellowship. They provided opportunities to share burdens and provide mutual support. But this practice was lost in the last century as each meeting became more independent and the society as a whole less interdependent.

The Days of Spiritual Sustenance were designed to address these needs. It was decided to offer this opportunity on four days in four locations – in particular in locations at or close to the smaller meetings so that it would be convenient for those in the smaller meetings to attend. In order to make it as easy as possible for anyone to attend, all costs were borne by the Ministry and Advancement Committee – including, as needed, help with participants' travel and child care expenses. These days were not open, however, to anyone who wanted to attend – each meeting was asked to name two or three people.

There were four goals for each day:

1. Participants would feel spiritually refreshed
2. Experiences would be shared

3. Those who provide spiritual nurture in the monthly meetings would get to know both their counterparts in other meetings and M&A members on whom they can call for help
4. Participants would have an opportunity to voice their needs:
 - a. As an individual who serves a meeting
 - b. For his or her committee to better serve the meeting
 - c. For his or her meeting's spiritual health

In addition, it was hoped that a couple other side-effects would result:

1. Meetings would recognize those who provide spiritual care and nurture
2. New relationships would be established between meetings and with the yearly meeting's Ministry and Advancement Committee

Two days of spiritual sustenance have been offered. One on February 12th in Oak Park; and the other in the St. Louis Meetinghouse on February 26th. Seventeen people from nine meetings participated. Three others, named by two other meetings, were unable to attend. I believe that these have been successful. The participants have felt energized and have made new connections with their peers in other meetings. The sharing has been deep and unguarded.

An unexpected aspect of these two days has been the times we have spent discussing the traditional roles of minister, elder, and overseer – how they are different and why they were each created. Generally, it was felt that we have lost something important when these are all lumped together. Each task requires particular spiritual gifts and individuals need to practice exercising these gifts if they are going to get good at them. Even when one person has multiple gifts, the work involved in trying to do too many things leaves him or her exhausted and not very good at any one of them.

There are two more days scheduled, one in Chesterton, Indiana (Duneland Meeting) on March 12th and one in Bloomington on March 19th, but even now, I feel that this is something to repeat and build on. It feels to me that they have indeed functioned much like the old Preparative Meeting of Ministers and Elders. Perhaps through this spiritual recreation, that role can be re-created.

Paul Buckley