

REFLECTION ON GATHERING AT CINCINNATI FRIENDS MEETINGHOUSE 4/30/2016

By David Goff

Attendees: Mary Ellen Krisher, Clerk, Cincinnati Meeting ; Jim Newby, Pastor, Cincinnati Meeting ; Jim Crocker-Larkness of Cincinnati Meeting; J.P. Lund, Clerk, Eastern Hills Meeting ; Franchot Ballinger, Ministry and Counsel Clerk, Eastern Hills Meeting ; Jennilou Grotevant, Clerk, Wilmington Meeting ; Doug Woodmansee, Ministry & Counsel Clerk, Wilmington Meeting ; Mike and Nany McCormick, Pastors, Chester & Springfield Meetings ; Patricia Thomas, Clerk, Campus Meeting ; Linda Sears, Ministry & Counsel Clerk, Campus Meeting ; Doug Haag, Executive Secretary, Wilmington Yearly Meeting ; and David Goff, Clerk, Wilmington Yearly Meeting. Julie Rudd, Pastor of Wilmington Friends was invited and sent a written statement, but was unable to attend due to a funeral.

Friends,

This will be my personal reflection in which I share with you what I brought away from our meeting in Cincinnati. I appreciate those of you who have already sent me yours. I ask that you read this carefully, and correct any misconceptions or errors I have made. Following this document, I will begin sharing responses to the group e-mails that you have sent to me. Thank you for your patience with me as I have been very busy over the last few weeks closing out the school year.

As you will recall, I identified the process that would guide our meeting together as follows:

“Following are some queries that I have on my mind. We may or may not use any or all of them, but they may help us reflect as we prepare for this meeting.

1. How long has your Meeting been considering the issue of Marriage Equality?
2. What thoughts, factors, or arguments were central in convincing your Meeting to take a stand for Marriage Equality?
3. What consideration, if any, did your Meeting give to the Biblical statements that seem to identify homosexual behavior as sinful? If they were considered, how were they dealt with?
4. What consideration, if any, did your Meeting give to the current position (limited though it may be) of Wilmington Yearly Meeting?
5. What thoughts, factors, or arguments were central in convincing your Meeting that now is the time to move forward with blessing same gender weddings?

As I have said before, I am coming to hear what you have to share with me. I intend to spend most of my time listening and asking questions based on what you share. These queries are just a guide to help open the conversation. I am not coming to give my thoughts or opinions, though I will freely respond if you have questions for me.”

After fellowship around the table, we moved to the library. I briefly summarized again the queries I had asked each of you to consider for the meeting, then asked each person to share freely, without constraint, but to use the queries as a guide.

Additional written material was submitted (some in print, some by email) that I would be happy to share with anyone who did not receive it. These included historical documents from Patricia Thomas and a beautifully written statement by Julie Rudd providing a Biblical foundation for interpreting the Scriptures in a way that favors marriage equality.

J.P. Lund of Eastern Hills was the first to speak. He shared that Eastern Hills is one of the “Bridge Meetings” which is dually aligned with Wilmington Yearly Meeting and Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting. J.P. shared that initially Eastern Hills accepted the 1997 “Working Document” that was approved by Wilmington Yearly Meeting. They lost members as a result of that statement. When Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting addressed the issue in a manner affirming marriage equality, there was no controversy at Eastern Hills about accepting it, though it was

uncomfortable to be dealing with two such disparate positions. Eastern Hills now holds to a position of favoring marriage equality, though they have not yet faced the situation of being asked to perform a marriage between same-gender persons. They do have a same gender couple attending who were wed in a legal ceremony as they did not want to be part of any controversy. J.P. states that Eastern Hills would choose Marriage Equality over membership in Wilmington Yearly Meeting if forced to make a choice between the two. J.P. stated that his goal is for Wilmington Yearly Meeting to follow the way forward proposed by Mary Heathman at the Yearly Meeting session in Maryville. He noted that the culture is changing and that same gender relationships are not an issue for young people today. J.P. noted that he is disturbed by ethnic bigotry, and that those who differ in their sexuality tend to be treated in a similar manner, being thought of as libertines who participate in licentious behavior. J.P. is distressed by closed-minded thinking about LGBT persons.

Patricia Thomas of Campus Meeting was next to speak. She identified Campus Meeting as the other “Bridge Meeting.” Campus has been discussing the issue since 1978, and it has never been a controversial issue for them. Campus has long been open to same marriage equality. When the Ohio Valley Minute was approved 5-6 years ago, Campus realized that they cannot sit under BOTH the Ohio Valley Statement and the Wilmington Statement. Campus spent time together in a day-long retreat two years ago, which led them to the decision that they would sit under the Ohio Valley Statement, after which they developed their own statement. Campus is open to God’s moving in people’s lives and gender is irrelevant. They also believe that the Meeting has a continuing responsibility to support couples that unite in marriage under their care. Patricia mentioned that several of their founding members were at that retreat. Another factor is that they had a same-sex couple worshipping with them that they came to love and saw them demonstrating a solid relationship. They could not see telling this couple no. (This is the same couple that also attended Eastern Hills). Campus will be offering a minute to Miami-Center Quarterly Meeting seeking a way forward. That way forward would be to trust Monthly Meetings to make their own decisions about this issue.

J.P. commented that he understands that this issue centers around a long-established taboo that is now being violated openly. Saying that it is OK to do so is a big step!

Mary Ellen Krisher of Cincinnati Friends spoke next. She states that the issue first arose in December of 1995. At that first discussion the position held by the Meeting was that the Worship Meeting was open and that anyone was welcome to attend. However they held to the position that marriage was to be between a man and a woman. They held to that position in 1997 when Wilmington Yearly Meeting made its “Working Document”. However, in 1999 Dan Kaztelan began to bring Linda and Alison, a lesbian couple, to church with him on a regular basis. As late as 2004, Cincinnati Friends still agreed with the WYM statement (1997) but by 2005 they had changed their minds and announced themselves to be as open and affirming. In 2014 they felt a need to further discuss the issue, and had a series of discussions in a worship sharing format. Two decisions came out of those meetings that were formally approved and minuted in March of 2016 without any opposing discussion.

1. CFM would not marry anyone whom they did not know.
2. CFM would consider marrying anyone from among their members, regardless of sexual orientation.

In April CFM a request for marriage was received and approved from the Clearness Committee working with Linda and her current partner, which stated (in part) that [the marriage] was the “natural, right, and good thing to do”. Mary Ellen concluded by saying, “We want to support them. We want them to be part of our community.”

Doug Woodmansee of Wilmington Meeting spoke next. He stated that discussions took place in 1995, and again in 1997, but that no unity was found at that time. Wilmington Meeting stood aside when the “Working Document” was approved by Permanent Board in 1997. He states that from that time, “the center of gravity kept moving.” The recent Supreme Court decision led Ministry & Counsel of WMM to bring up the issue again. Though there is no marriage request on the horizon, and no openly gay person active in the Meeting, it seemed that it would be good to discuss the issue now when it could be considered dispassionately. In their discussion, there were strong voices in favor of marriage equality, and no debate opposing that point of view. Doug gave his personal story, indicating that in 1997 he approved the “Working Document.” Gradually, however, marriage equality stopped seeming bizarre to him as the years passed. Eventually he felt that he had to give up the traditional view.

Nancy and Mike McCormick, pastors of Chester and Springfield Meetings were next. It should be noted that I did not specifically invite them to the meeting, as I was unaware of their positions on the matter of concern. I was grateful that they chose to participate in this discussion! As I recall, and as my notes seem to reflect, Nancy did most of the talking with some supportive commentary interjected by Mike from time-to-time. Nancy stated that in 1997 she believed that homosexuality is a sin. Then, she stated, “God started sending gay people!” Acceptance for Mike and Nancy has been a gradual personal awakening and opening. Chester currently has gay people attending. Nancy and Mike were recently asked to participate in a same-gender marriage last fall (2015). They talked to their Clerk and Ministry and Counsel Clerk, and they were supportive. Mike and Nancy believe that the consensus of the members of both Chester and Springfield Meetings will be that they are not yet ready for same-gender marriages, but that other Meetings can do so if they wish. They would be hesitant about writing a minute at this time.

We heard next from **Franchot Ballinger of Eastern Hills**. He stated that he was Clerk of Community Friends Meeting when they celebrated a homosexual marriage. He addressed his two major concerns as being:

1. A concern that the country would believe that all Friends take that position.
2. The Bible: “Everyone cherry-picks scripture.” He notes that there are “passages I choose to honor” and that he “hope[s] to receive love and acceptance from Wilmington Yearly Meeting.”

Patricia Thomas responded in agreement, stating, “I take the Bible very seriously.”

Jim Newby, pastor of Cincinnati Friends spoke next. He noted that he was grappling with the issue since gay men began coming to him for counseling in the 1970s. He explains that his reason for being “open and affirming” is that “I believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Jim stated that his position is that on controversial issues that Christians should, “Agree to differ, Resolve to love, and Unite to serve.”

Jim Crocker-Larkness of Cincinnati Meeting also indicated a concern with Christians “cherry-picking the Bible”. He stressed that he is a Christian pacifist and finds other positions to be un-Quakerly, and more so than the issue under discussion. However, he believes that sincere and honest Quakers may have “different readings” of the Bible.

Linda Sears of Campus Friends had two questions:

1. Do you not want gay (&etc.) people in Meeting? Do you accept them?
2. What about people who marry outside of the Meeting?

J.P. Lund spoke up to provide a counterexample:

He spoke of a man who came through their Meeting, not openly gay, but profoundly disturbed. He states that, "If that was the only gay person I had known, I would not have been where I am today." He continued, saying "People need direction, People need moral standards." He noted that traditional structures are falling down, leaving nothing in their place.

BREAK: At this time, as everyone had spoken, I called for a brief break. **Doug Haag** asked to say a few words as he had to leave. He indicated his appreciation to all for coming out and participating in the discussion. He honestly admitted that he had a different perspective from that shared by most of those present, but he did so in a brief, respectful, and non-judgmental fashion. He further shared that he has a daughter who struggles with addiction issues and that he loved her deeply despite that, and wished that people were as supportive of her in her struggles with her sinful lifestyle as the folks who had gathered were supportive of those dealing with homosexual issues. Patricia Thomas, Doug Woodmansee, and Linda Sears also left at this time.

SESSION 2

We reconvened after about a 20 minute break. I asked those gathered where we should go next in our discussion. I stated that I would be willing to share my perspective, but only if requested by the group. The purpose of the meeting was for me to listen and I would only present my viewpoint if asked. I also suggested we could talk about next steps. The consensus was that the discussion should be about next steps, that is, where do we go from here? I was not asked, nor did I explain my position, other than to comment in passing that I do not share the point of view expressed by the majority present at the meeting. Any assumptions beyond that statement about my personal beliefs at this time are therefore presumptions.

The consensus of our discussion during the second session was that it would be worthwhile for those who support marriage equality to follow my example and engage in listening sessions with those who hold the opposing point of view. I was asked if I would be willing to facilitate the arranging of a meeting or some meetings for that purpose. I agreed that I am willing to do so, and that then, perhaps, we could bring together representatives of each group, people who had participated in the listening sessions and who had a cool head, to talk to one another. I believe that this is a very positive idea that has the potential to bring us together. Even if it does not bring us together, it could conceivably make any future discussions much less rancorous.

The other part of the discussion during the second session came out of me being asked what might come about if no further progress has been made when (not if!) one of the Meetings present blessed a same-sex marriage. Believing that nothing is to be gained by glossing over the seriousness of this issue in the minds of those who oppose your position, I asserted my belief that there would be a huge outcry and a movement to discipline that Meeting, probably to the point of discussing the laying down of that Meeting and the seizure of its building and assets. My point is not, and was not, that this will happen. (As comments made then and later comments by

e-mail have indicated, it would be very difficult for that to be carried out!) My point is that this is the level of intense emotion that we will be faced with if we do not find a better way forward. After spending some time in the relative gloom of considering such possibilities, Nancy McCormick reminded us all that we are trying to avert such a crisis and that we should not be dwelling on possibilities that might never arise. Recognizing the wisdom of those words, we left that discussion behind and spent the rest of the meeting considering arranging meetings for talking with each other. It is my opinion that even while considering possible negative repercussions, that the meeting continued to maintain a loving and respectful fellowship with one another, despite our differing perspectives. I think all present recognized that I am not in favor of the sanctions that some might try to bring against your Meetings. Rather, my hope is that we might somehow find a way forward together. If that is not possible, I hope that if some separation becomes necessary that it can be handled in a respectful, loving and peaceable manner.