



Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting

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Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting, like-minded Friends, NCYM superintendent, NCYM clerk, and NCYM Ministry & Counsel clerk:

The Friends at Poplar Ridge have spent the past several months in prayer and discernment regarding the spiritual vitality and unity of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting. In July 2014 we felt led to send a letter to each clerk and Monthly Meeting in an effort to clearly communicate our main concerns. Our main concerns remain:

- 1) A crucial disagreement about the Person and Work of Jesus Christ and the Authority of Scripture.
- 2) A lack of integrity among member meetings of NC Yearly Meeting who no longer affirm the NCYM Faith and Practice.
- 3) Meetings that refuse to pay Askings out of protest.
- 4) Some Yearly Meeting leadership (clerks and committee members) comes from meetings that do not affirm NC Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice.

Our letter served to spur a vital and honest conversation across the Yearly Meeting about the issues listed above. We found, much to our surprise, that several Meetings shared our concerns and were like-minded about the issues at hand. The gathered body of 2014 NCYM Annual Sessions (with much drudgery and tension) put forth a plan to form a committee to help deal with these issues. Through hard work and prayer, the New Committee formed some recommendations but they, in our opinion, only speak to our symptoms without addressing our illness.

The Representative Body session on March 7th at Quaker Lake offered some very good insight into our current condition as a Body. The tone was civil and the conversation during session was open and honest. The clerk did a very good job in recognizing folks from across the spectrum of our Yearly Meeting and kept the session well ordered. The work of the New Committee should be commended as they have poured hours of prayer and discussion into their efforts and clearly communicated their recommendations before the Representative Body session.

However, after six hours of discussion, we found ourselves unable to approve a full report from the New Committee. This is especially discouraging because the report, even if approved, is non-binding. Perhaps the most revelatory aspect of the March 7th Representative Body was the way Friends sought to shift and maneuver phrasing in a way that reduces the impact and implementation of the New Committee report. In an honest moment, Friends spoke with great integrity to the damaging nature of the larger body approving a report that does not genuinely speak to the condition of Friends. That is, we can approve words all day, but what good is that approval if it is not going to be upheld with honesty and integrity?

Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting does not perceive a clear way forward together that will lead to a fruitful, vibrant and growing ministry in our Yearly Meeting. God desires His church to grow and reach the entire world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should be busy planting churches, sending missionaries and supporting efforts to bring justice to the voiceless. Instead, we are in a gradual and inevitable decline, using our valuable time together to wrangle over basic elements of identity. A house divided, indeed, cannot stand and we are seeing the predictable outcome of maintaining a Quaker house without a Christian foundation.

We can, of course, stay together and march on as though our division and decline will disappear; we can cling to the methods and traditions of the past in hopes that, one day, we will suddenly reverse course. History and common sense tell us that hanging on to the past at the expense of the future is a sure path to spiritual tepidity and congregational decline. Our Savior warns us, *"your tradition makes void the Word of God!"* (Matthew 15.3). We should, of course, appreciate our past and value our traditions, but only as much as they help us carry God's plan for His church into the future.

The Ministry & Counsel of Poplar Ridge Friends cannot recommend remaining linked to the North Carolina Yearly Meeting. There is a genuine respect and affection for Friends across the theological spectrum in the North Carolina Yearly Meeting. We certainly understand that no healthy congregational body can exist without some theological tensions. A perfectly uniform Orthodoxy is not possible and it should not be the goal of a larger body. However, as evidenced by our recent history, Friends in NCYM do not share even basic normative beliefs and convictions, which therefore makes passionate, vibrant, growing and healthy ministry impossible. Without a shared foundation, the bar for ministry is lowered and we are reduced to the simple sharing of resources. Being linked only by the sharing of funds and resources does not create community; rather, it encourages indifference among Friends. We believe God desires His church to be unified and passionate in ministry moving forward; not simply to pass funds around.

With much prayer, fasting and discernment we believe the Holy Spirit is leading us in a new direction at Poplar Ridge. We seek to gather with like-minded Friends to explore the possibility of forming a new association. This new Body could have a renewed sense of vision and create an environment that makes ministry among the larger Body of Friends simple and unhindered by the weight of our current issues.

Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting approved to continue to pay askings to the NCYM as long as we are a part of this Body. This will help us remain unified and to encourage an open dialogue.

All the details of this leading are as yet unresolved. Part of having faith is *"being sure of what we do not see..."* (Hebrews 11.1) and that means trusting God to guide each step. Our tentative plan is to communicate with the Yearly Meeting superintendant, NCYM clerk and NCYM Ministry and Counsel clerk about our leading. Transparency is essential. From there, we would like to gather with like-minded Friends who share our convictions and our desires for a new association. Gathering formally with Friends who share our vision will help us lay the logistical and administrative groundwork for this endeavor. We imagine that we could potentially formalize our new association and amicably part ways with the NCYM by the 2015 Annual Sessions.

As we envision a new association, we imagine a group of congregations that share the same core convictions and ministry ambitions, which leads to vibrant, fruitful ministry. We dream of an association that:

- 1) Helps develop healthy churches that plant churches and makes disciples
- 2) Guides local meetings with hands-on consultation to encourage growth and vibrancy
- 3) Welcomes spiritual, theological and administrative accountability
- 4) Stresses the importance of relevant local and global social ministry and seeks to bring justice for the voiceless and vulnerable
- 5) Encourages pastors and elders in their ministry while creating the expectation of excellence

It is our hope that this vision will be embraced by those who share our heart and (at least) appreciated by those who do not. We will continue in prayer, respect and friendship for our North Carolina Yearly Meeting family. We hope that Friends will not see this as a mere division caused by frustration, but a new and genuine movement of the Holy Spirit that could bear Kingdom fruit for years to come.

Fearfully, cautiously and prayerfully yours,

David R. Mercadante, Senior Pastor

J. Mark Allen, Monthly Meeting Clerk

Attachments: 1) *Reorganization of a New Yearly Meeting*; 2) *Proposed Statement of Belief*

ROUGH DRAFT 3/18/15
Not yet approved by Ministry & Counsel

REORGANIZATION OF A NEW YEARLY MEETING

We seek to create a new Yearly Meeting that can be unified in beliefs and vision. We see a day that we can gather to worship Jesus Christ and spread His good news to the hurting world around us, both locally and globally.

We recognize the beauty of entering into a relationship with other Friends meetings, sharing our resources and talents to provide missions and ministries that will glorify God and increase His kingdom. We seek to be unified and work together, holding each other up in prayer. We enter into a relationship that welcomes accountability, realizing that we all, at times, need to be reminded of our commitment to Jesus Christ. We welcome discipline that draws us closer in line with God's will.

Current meetings and future meetings / congregations would be welcome to join this New Yearly Meeting now or at any time. Meetings would also be able to withdraw their membership without penalty if they see fit.

Suggested Reorganization:

NAME

A new name would need to be decided upon for the New Yearly Meeting, making sure that it would be easy to understand and provide meaning to those inside the Yearly Meeting and to those outside who would hopefully consider joining.

QUARTERLY MEETINGS

We recommend reducing the number of Quarters to four. These four quarters would be divided based on three factors:

- ◆ Proximity (in order to make it easier for meetings to gather)
- ◆ Equal number of meetings (in order to not have some quarters larger than others)
- ◆ An attempt at making membership equal among each quarter (to help quarter representatives to be representing roughly the same amount of people)

The primary purpose of these Quarters would be to share a common, local mission. They would also provide a voice and representation to the New Yearly Meeting from local meetings. We want to remember that the Yearly Meeting exists to support the local meeting; the local meeting does not exist to support the Yearly Meeting. Every ten years, we would realign the four Quarters to bring us back to this equality and refocused mission. This would account for any growth or loss and make sure that each member's voice would be heard.

COMMITTEES

Since there are so many current committees, with so many appointments to be made, we recommend reducing the number of committees and possibly the number of members on many committees. We also recommend that each of the four Quarters would form their own nominating committee that would send one representative to each yearly meeting committee, with additional committee members by appointment of a yearly meeting nominating committee.

MINISTRY & COUNSEL

We recommend that the New Yearly Meeting Ministry & Counsel Committee be the overseers of the spiritual leadership of this New Yearly Meeting instead of an Executive Committee. Yearly Meeting Ministry & Counsel sessions should only be attended by current members of local Ministry & Counsels and by Yearly Meeting Ministry & Counsel Committee members. Appointments to the New Yearly Meeting Ministry & Counsel should only be from members who are currently on their local Ministry & Counsel at the time of their appointment.

FAITH & PRACTICE

We recommend creating a new Faith and Practice for the New Yearly Meeting, based on NCYM Faith and Practice. Revisions would need to be made to incorporate the new organizational structure mentioned in other sections of this document. It would also include the new Faith Statement that reflects the faith statements in the "Richmond Declaration of Faith." Other possible revisions might include adding testimonies against human trafficking or the cautionary use of media, and the advisement against (instead of the prohibition of) the use and abuse of tobacco and alcohol. Specific wording to these testimonies could come at a later time.

ASKINGS

We recommend a budget be set for the new Yearly Meeting and that the cost be divided among member meetings equally. This division of cost, through askings, would be based on worship attendance from the previous year. These askings would probably be small at the beginning and would probably increase as more ministries and missions were added. The money from askings should support a common mission, not just pay for Yearly Meeting overhead. To remain a member of this New Yearly Meeting, every local meeting would be required to turn in a statistical report that would include attendance and financial information.

STAFF

We would need many people to help with this New Yearly Meeting's organization in the beginning. It is our hope to hire a basic staff as soon as was financially possible. A Superintendent, an Office & Financial Manager, and someone over Program Ministries would probably be the first needs we would have. Until such people are in place, we would need to accomplish these tasks through volunteers.

OFFICE

Depending on the division of assets from NCYM, we may need to seek temporary office space (possibly in one of our own meetings if necessary).

YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS

We would attempt to offer programs to help our youth and young adults grow in the Christian faith. Again, this would need to happen on a volunteer basis, even after a staff member was hired.

DISCIPLINE

In order to avoid disputes, and in case an issue arose within a meeting that was against our agreed upon statement of faith, a group from Yearly Meeting Ministry & Counsel could meet with the meeting to pray with them and possibly elder them. If no consensus could be found and the meeting refused to comply with what our New Yearly Meeting had agreed upon, it would be possible in such an extreme situation for a representative from each member meeting of the New Yearly Meeting to agree (perhaps on a minimum level of 80/20 agreement) to remove a meeting from our membership. In such a situation, that meeting would forfeit any claims they had on the New Yearly Meeting.

MISSIONS AND MINISTRIES

We recognize that in its beginning, the New Yearly Meeting would be limited in funds it would have available. A Missions Committee would be formed to make decisions on what missions we would be able to support. Of course as we grew, we would be able to take on new opportunities of giving and service. The same would be true of our ministries; we would need to form a group to ascertain which ministries were crucial to start with and what other ones might need to wait until resources (such as people and funds) were available.

AFFILIATION

We recommend that this New Yearly Meeting be independent. There are struggles with what Friends United Meeting believes, just as there have been with NC Yearly Meeting. Since very few of our members have any

connection with FUM, we do not see it as a necessary body for us to carry on the work that we are called to. Any missions that FUM supports, that we decide to support as well, could still be done.

QUAKER LAKE CAMP

We encourage Quaker Lake Camp to become an independent body. This is already their desire and intention. It would be our desire to see them not to have to depend on Yearly Meeting askings to operate. We desire to continue to support Quaker Lake through prayer, leadership, finances, and attendance. We would also hope to continue to use Quaker Lake as any other body would, by reserving space with them. Hopefully, down the road when we become more financially stable, we could offer our member meetings help through our askings to reduce the fee for Quaker Lake usage. We would desire to reserve some weeks during the summer to provide camp for our students, led by our "summer staff," similar to how other Yearly Meetings (such as Indiana and Western) share a camp. Of course this raises many other issues, one of which would be who would serve on a "Quaker Lake Board" etc. These decisions would have to be made (hopefully peaceably) with NCYM.

SOME OF THE DIFFICULT DETAILS THAT STILL NEED TO BE FIGURED OUT:

Obviously not every detail can be anticipated. This document is an attempt at beginning that process. We pray that a NCYM split could be done amicably and peacefully. Although we disagree on many things, surely we can all agree that our witness to the world as Quakers would be damaged if we cannot come to some agreement that is fair to all.

ASSETS

There are many properties, trust funds, etc. that would have to be divided. Other groups, including Yearly Meetings, have found ways to do this. Surely we can as well.

PROCEDURES

We have set out a timeline that tries to avoid the endless uncertainty of an end. The longer we debate and argue, the more damage is done to meetings and individuals. We would have to set up a procedure for a division. We also recognize that each meeting is different and has different concerns and needs. We encourage each meeting to move at a pace that would most benefit them. We would not be a closed group to anyone who needed more time to pray about the decision to join the New Yearly Meeting.

RECORDING OF MINISTERS / PENSIONS / ETC.

We would want to proceed in such a manner to insure that our recorded ministers would not lose their recording. As we set up a New Yearly Meeting, we would want to plan for this and also insure that any pension would be honored.

LEGAL ISSUES

It is our desire to come to an agreement that would be fair and try and minimize any legal procedures. Obviously a division of property etc. would involve legal council. In order to legally move into a New Yearly Meeting that would have assets, recorded ministers, etc., the New Yearly Meeting would need to be established before we would transfer our membership from NC Yearly Meeting.

There is much more to add to this document, but in closing:

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." --Hebrews 10.23-25

Proposed Statement of Belief

Please refer to the *Richmond Declaration of Faith* for a more comprehensive outline of belief.

God – We believe in God, who is Holy, eternal, all-seeing, all powerful and all knowing. God is mighty beyond imagination, but He is not distant. We believe we can know God and He desires to know us. Indeed, the greatest satisfaction and ultimate purpose of human life is to know God and enjoy Him forever. We believe God the Father shares equally in glory in the Trinity with the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ – We believe in Jesus, the only begotten Son of God. Jesus is God in the flesh and the visual representation of an invisible God. We believe Jesus descended from the right hand of the Father to join humanity on earth where He was born of a virgin, suffered temptation, bore the sin of humanity and died on Calvary's cross. After three days, He defeated death by rising from the grave. We come into relationship with Jesus when we acknowledge the wages of sin are death, repent and accept the saving work of Jesus. In this way, we are resurrected with Christ; out of sin and condemnation and into the Kingdom of God and eternity with Him. Jesus Christ is the sole means of salvation and communion with God. We trust His words, *"I am the way, the truth and the life, none may come to the Father except through me"*. (John 16.2) Without salvation in Christ, we stand condemned by God and face an eternity, separated from God enduring the punishment of hell.

Holy Spirit – We believe in the Holy Spirit who acts as the Presence of God. We cannot see God and Jesus ascended, but the Holy Spirit is the invisible manifestation of the invisible Divine. We can sense the operation of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as He works to transform our lives toward holiness and obedience to God. The Holy Spirit works to draw us close to God, making us aware of our sin and drawing us to repentance. We believe the Holy Spirit works in accord with the Bible and the two never contradict one another.

The Holy Scriptures – We believe the Bible to be wholly inspired by God and through this revelation from Him we form our theology, worship and ethics. The Old and New Testaments provide an insight into the history of God's relationship with His creation and reveal a future devoted to the eternal worship of Him. The Bible makes clear a path for salvation and discipleship and provides a clear and reliable guide to becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The Sacraments – We believe that signs and symbols are valuable in acting as a witness of our faith and expressing a devotion to God. We believe that every encounter with God must begin as an inward work of the Holy Spirit and that God does not affect our inward heart by the mere observation of outward sacraments. Communion with God begins in the heart through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Believers may choose to symbolize this encounter with the Bread of Life by breaking bread in worship. Repentance leads to a cleansing of the stain of sin through the atonement of Jesus Christ. Believers may wish to express this conversion through water baptism. These signs, however, are not mandatory expressions of an inward belief. They may complement discipleship, but they do not complete salvation. Just as a person can wear a wedding ring without being married, so too an unconverted soul can be ceremonially baptized with water. Every symbolic expression of conversion, discipleship and worship must first be borne from within by an inward movement of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, they are just fruitless symbols of an empty faith.

Marriage – We believe marriage is a God-ordained institution exclusively between one man and one woman for their lifetime. God ordained marriage as the means for continuation of the human family, the nurture of children and to encourage holiness and discipleship for the entire home. According to Scripture, Christian marriage acts as a living symbol of the "profound mystery" (Ephesian 5.32) of Christ's love for His church.