



Editor's Note: *Quaker Theology* is normally published twice a year, with the next issue, #26, not due til later this year. However, events in North Carolina Yearly Meeting (FUM) are unfolding rapidly, so we are making available this second preview report. Watch for updates. The complete set of published issues is available for reading, free, on our website: www.quakertheology.org

Thunder In Carolina:
North Carolina Yearly Meeting - FUM

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I

As this issue went to press, North Carolina Yearly Meeting-FUM (NCYM) was on the brink of a showdown over its future, with a high probability of undergoing a major schism.

What's at stake in the struggle? Many things, but what stands out are four Ms: Mission, morality, marriage, and money.

The showdown either will – or will not – occur at the Spring meeting of NCYM's Representative Body on March 7. The imminence of a split could take the form of a proposal to “restructure” the yearly meeting (YM), or a walkout by some dissatisfied local meetings.

Or the session could deflect and delay a collision, mainly by ignoring the calls for division, or referring them to committees for more study and discussion. And those who see the session as the last stand before bolting could back away from their self-imposed deadlines.

II

To fill in the background of this crisis, one could go back more than a hundred years; but that would turn this report into a book. Suffice to say that over the past several generations, many NCYM meetings have turned into community churches with a what is close to a Southern Baptist culture and outlook.

This church culture, in much of the South, has been for decades a kind of unofficial established church. Southern Baptists are by far the largest denomination in North Carolina, outnumbering the next group, Methodists, by four to one. Given this predominance, the Southern Baptist culture extends far beyond the confines of actual churches. It is accustomed to having its

views taken as a baseline, and treated with deference by lesser groups and sects. This church culture is focused above all on what is called “mission,” which translates into sending missionaries to convert heathens in distant lands, and building ever-larger church congregations at home. Everything else takes a back seat to this “mission.”

However, over the last few decades, the real Southern Baptists, after a long period of growth in membership, have experienced a sharp decline in numbers. Young adults, the so-called “Millennials,” have been jumping ship in especially large numbers. And when mission-as-growth is the top priority, decline is not just a setback, it’s a sign of religious failure as well.

The exceptions to this downward trend are the so-called megachurches, some of which have grown enormous even while overall church attendance has declined, and many smaller churches are barely on life support. Outside the megachurches, large numbers of Baptist pastors are being obliged to become “bivocational,” that is, to take a secular job in addition to church work, because their congregations can’t afford to pay them a full-time salary. Other denominations, north as well as south, are reporting similar trends; seminary enrollment is also down.

Two reactions to this trend are common: on the one side, many look to the megachurches as examples to duplicate. And on the other, there is a search for scapegoats: “If it weren’t for [*fill in the blank*], we’d be fine, growing and as vigorous and respected as in the old days.” Such heresy hunts and resultant schisms are among the oldest and most enduring of Southern Baptist pastimes.

In NCYM, membership decline over the past thirty-plus years has been dramatic: it has shrunk by more than half, and closed numerous meetings, with no sign of slowing. Along with decline in numbers has come a drop in donation income; drawing up budgets, and then meeting them, has become an increasingly painful and penurious process. The yearly meeting has several million dollars in trust funds, however; and as annual budgets get tighter, these funds look increasingly tempting.

As with the Baptists, both responses to this slide have appeared in NCYM as well. There are no megachurches in NCYM; but a couple could be on the way. The most likely candidate may be Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting in Trinity, which lists a

membership of 400, hardly “mega,” but large as far as NCYM goes. Further, its pastor, David Mercadante, seems quite sure that his church’s path is the model the YM should emulate.

Then there are the scapegoats, for whom “liberals” and “universalists” are the catchall terms of obloquy. This category includes those who question the Bible’s ultimate authority, entertain non-traditional notions about Jesus or the Bible, read Universalist Quaker writers such as Philip Gulley, are indifferent to foreign missions, often vote Democrat (even for Democrats named Obama), may even oppose U.S. wars, affirm LGBT presence in their meetings, could even be LGBT themselves, or – currently the sorest point of all – support same sex marriage.

Countering the Baptist-oriented community church trend, there are a number of NCYM meeting which have gone in this liberal direction. They are a minority, but among them are New Garden Friends in Greensboro, which is nearly as large as Poplar Ridge; First Friends, also in Greensboro; Winston-Salem Meeting; Spring Meeting in the farmland between Greensboro and Chapel Hill; Fancy Gap Friends, a small fellowship just over the Virginia border near Mt. Airy (home of the iconic “Mayberry R.F.D.”) and a few others.

None of these “liberal” meetings would look particularly advanced from, say, a northern or western liberal Quaker perspective: all are programmed, most have pastors, and all think highly, if flexibly, of Jesus and Christianity.

But for the Baptist-tinged “mission” advocates, these meetings are more than too liberal; they are a threat. And for NCYM to reverse its decline, the Baptist-oriented conclusion is clear: they must go. Now.

And the summer of 2014, it was decided, the time had come for their departure. It was overdue, actually.

III

In his pastoral letter of December 2013, Poplar Ridge pastor David Mercadante wrote confidently about war:

History tells us that a great war requires a great invasion. Before the war can be fought, the offensive force must

stage a bold and ambitious attack to breach the opponent's defenses. Everything we know about war tells us that when you invade, you had better be big, bold and powerful.

And so it has been in North Carolina Yearly Meeting (NCYM for short). Beginning in mid-summer 2014, Mercadante was a key figure in organizing a three-pronged assault on what was seen as a corrupt and heretical yearly meeting establishment, in pursuit of what they called "unity" on "core beliefs."

The "offensive" opened with a barrage of aggressive letters, the first of which came from Mercadante's Poplar Ridge Meeting on July 8, 2014. The authors claimed to have identified widespread heresy, "lack of integrity" and dishonesty in officers and members of key YM committees.

The letters demanded the immediate removal of all YM officers and committee members "who will not affirm the basic elements of the Christian faith" as Poplar Ridge and the others interpreted it.

They were especially incensed because several NCYM meetings had "dual affiliation," that is they were affiliated with the Piedmont Friends Fellowship (PFF), a loose association that was organized in the 1960s, and admits meetings of various YMs or none. Besides being alien, PFF's worst sin was its acceptance in the liberal umbrella group Friends General Conference.

"This [FGC connection] creates an obvious and irreconcilable conflict," Poplar Ridge's letter insisted, between its members and "those who no longer affirm our shared confession." All such meetings "should be honest in their assessment and seek other denominational affiliation."

Other spoke out even more forcefully. Two members of Holly Springs Meeting wrote that

Slowly over the years, liberal thinking groups have infiltrated our Yearly Meeting and now hold some positions on committees. . . . Those who do not believe in the Holy Trinity, those who do not believe in Jesus Christ as our only salvation as the son of God, those who do not believe the Bible as Gods Word, and those who do not

believe in our Declaration of Faith set out in our Faith and Practice should be asked to leave the Yearly Meeting immediately and resign all positions held.

Ken Spivey, a longtime pastor, likewise did not mince words: “These meetings should be expelled, (‘written [sic] out of meeting’).”

Poplar Ridge also set a deadline:

Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting has decided that it will not continue to financially support the Yearly Meeting until there is a basic sense of unity among Friends within NCYM. We will meet our financial commitment through March 2015. From that point forward, any monies we would normally pay into Askings will be placed into an escrow account we designate and control. These monies will be released to the Yearly Meeting at such a time as we sense unity and a clear path forward has been achieved. [NOTE: “Askings” is the term for annual amounts the YM expects each meeting to contribute to the YM budget.]

Plainfield Meeting’s letter set the same date:

Through much prayer and discernment Plainfield Friends Meeting has decided that it can no longer support NCYM financially because of severe Theological differences, integrity, stewardship, and the lack of Christ centeredness, among some of our Meetings and among some of the leadership within NCYM. With that being said, Plainfield Friends Meeting will continue to pay 100% of our Askings to NCYM through March of 2015. Beginning on April 1st 2015, Plainfield Friends Meeting will no longer support NCYM with our Askings. We will withhold all Askings to be paid to the NCYM and we will put them into an escrow account until we feel that NCYM has not only addressed the concerns but ***DEALT*** with these concerns as well. At such a time, when we feel led by the Spirit that NCYM has taken the appropriate measures in

the right direction, we will release those funds to NCYM.

(Note Plainfield's five-fold emphasis on "dealt" – bold, capitals, larger type, italics, underlined.)

A dozen such letters, most from meetings, have been collected by *Quaker Theology*; but there may be more. They repeat the talking points set out by Poplar Ridge. Although addressed to the yearly meeting Executive Committee, many circulated widely, and even ended up on the web. (All the ones we have are listed in the Appendix, with links to the full texts.)

This epistolary salvo was soon followed by a "bold and ambitious" siege. It was mounted at the yearly meeting's sessions over Labor Day weekend in September 2014. While the letters came from a relatively small number of the yearly meeting's 72 monthly meetings, carloads of their fired-up members arrived, packed the hall, and were soon making their presence loudly felt.

IV

Two initial targets were the incumbent presiding Clerk, William Eagles, and Jack Ciancio, the Clerk of the YM Executive Committee. Eagles is a member of New Garden Meeting in Greensboro, which was the biggest target of the banish-the-liberals effort.

New Garden is also one of the oldest in the yearly meeting: in 1781 a major battle of the American Revolution was fought around its early meetinghouse; New Garden Quakers tended the wounded and dying of both sides. Now it occupies several acres across the street from Guilford College, founded by Friends in 1837.

But both New Garden and Guilford have long been anathema to the more evangelical elements here. "We should disassociate ourselves," said Ken Spivey, "from any ministry/organization that is not Bible-based and Christ-centered, such as Guilford College . . ." And on his list of heretical meetings that should be "expelled," New Garden was first.

Eagles' first term as Clerk was set to expire; a second term is usually routine. But opposition was loud and vitriolic, and Eagles quickly announced that he would not seek re-appointment.

That was one down. Next the guns were turned on Jack Ciancio,

Clerk of the Executive Committee. Ciancio attends Ararat Meeting, in a small town on the Virginia border, and is a thoughtful sort, no fundamentalist, but hardly a college liberal. Unlike Eagles, he was not up for re-appointment.

No matter, after hours of insult and denunciation, Ciancio left the meeting session and resigned from the committee, reportedly vowing never to serve in a yearly meeting post again.

That was two down. But the challengers wanted more. As it was put by the letter from Holly Springs members

The Bible is the only authority on scriptural matters. Our Yearly Meeting has become “Unequally Yoked” with individuals and groups who do not share our same belief. . . . Some meetings hold dual memberships in other organizations. Our Faith and Practice prohibits dual memberships. The vast majority of our Yearly Meeting is in total disagreement with these organizations on basic theological issues. . . . A great division has been created in our Yearly Meeting that has caused much strife among us making it impossible to continue. We pray in much distress over this matter but we are convicted that in separation, we can grow once again as a Yearly Meeting.

[Note: spelling is original; and the NCYM Faith and Practice does not in fact prohibit the kind of affiliations represented by Piedmont Friends Fellowship.]

Yet despite all the commotion, the yearly meeting did not separate, and in that respect the assault was blunted. But in response to the uproar, the annual session created a “New Committee”, which was charged with examining the concerns and formulating proposals in response, to be presented at the fall meeting of the NCYM Representative Body, on November 1, 2014.

Despite its seeming success, once the annual session dispersed, the third prong of the “big, bold invasion” Mercadante and his colleagues had mounted began to sputter. The road to their vision of “unity” began to seem less clear and straightforward.

If there was a roadmap for the campaign, it was outlined by Ron Selleck, a religion professor at Laurel University in High Point NC:

The time for continued “dialogues” and discussion groups has passed. No administrative tweaking will do the job. Regrettably, the only possible resolution I see is for as amicable a divorce as possible along the lines of Indiana Yearly Meeting. I would spell out the reasons for this conclusion, but I would only be reiterating what the Poplar Ridge letter has already said so well.

The key phrase here is: “as amicable a divorce as possible along the lines of Indiana Yearly Meeting.” Selleck also made clear that he has long sought this outcome. Indeed, his advocacy predates his arrival in North Carolina.

In 1991, there was a similar move for forced “unity.” It was dubbed “Realignment,” and was aimed at Friends United Meeting at large. Had it happened, “Realignment” would have entailed expelling several of the less evangelical FUM-affiliated yearly meetings, and splitting others. Selleck was then the pastor of West Richmond Friends in Richmond, Indiana, and an outspoken champion of “realignment.” Indeed, he gave the keynote address at a “Realignment” conference in September of 1991, which was meant to mobilize the “bold and powerful” uprising that would carry the campaign through.

The conference happened, but the “Realignment” didn’t. Only one of the FUM yearly meetings (California) formally endorsed the drive; Indiana Yearly Meeting officers, while proclaimed themselves entirely “Christ-centered,” were dead-set against separations, and resolutely squashed the effort there. As “Realignment” faltered, California Yearly Meeting left FUM, changed its name to Friends Church Southwest, and joined Evangelical Friends International. Selleck soon resigned his Indiana pastorate, and moved to Carolina.

His views, however, did not shift. And others still in Indiana, who shared his hopes, bided their time, and eventually rose to the

top of the yearly meeting ladder. When another opportunity arose, in 2008, they were ready. It came when West Richmond Friends Meeting, Selleck's onetime employer, adopted a "welcoming and affirming" minute, formally opening its fellowship to gays and lesbians.

Readers of *Quaker Theology* will know that we covered what Selleck called the "amicable divorce" in Indiana Yearly Meeting that was sparked by West Richmond's action over its three year course (see QT Issues #18-#24). We won't repeat those accounts here, except to indicate that they suggest significant differences between Indiana and North Carolina.

For instance, unlike the 1991 "Realignment" struggle, when the yearly meeting clerk was staunchly opposed to a split, in 2008 both the Clerk and the Superintendent were prime movers behind it, and made no secret of their determination. Further, Indiana's Faith & Practice seemed to give the yearly meeting formal authority over monthly meetings, which they were intent on exercising to the max. And in West Richmond they selected a target whose members had little stomach for actually pushing back on behalf of preserving its membership in the yearly meeting.

And not least, the Indiana leadership was quite prepared to bend Quaker business practice as far as needed to ensure the outcome they wanted. The retired president of Earlham College, Douglas Bennett, fingered this tactic, both as history and prediction, in a blog post before the crucial business meeting:

Schisms require some governance fiddle.. . . somewhere, somehow in each schism there has been some forcing, some deviation from our best governance practices. We have divided by not finding unity – or declaring 'unity' when there was none."

Bennett then asked, "Will that happen in Indiana?" He soon had his answer.

(Bennet, Doug: quote, online at: <http://bit.ly/1E7qIg7>)

The evidence of the Indiana "fiddle" was plain to see when the dust settled: their effort to remove a single heretical local meeting was so alienating that in the end eighteen Indiana meetings left.

And no Quaker Clerk who can gavel through a decision that overrides the settled opposition of nearly 30 percent of the body's membership is operating by anything resembling honest Friends business process. They got what they wanted, but what the "victors" in Indiana smugly referred to as a "collaborative reconfiguration," was an engineered purge, no more and no less.

And when the "unified" Indiana Yearly meeting gathered in the summer of 2013 for their first post-purge sessions, they invited as their keynote speaker – Ron Selleck, to come and take a victory lap, twenty-three years after his earlier setback. No wonder he was ready to see it duplicated in North Carolina.

But as Douglas Bennett might again ask, Will that happen in NCYM?

So far, North Carolina has been different. For instance, the new Clerk, Michael Fulp Sr., the evangelically-inclined Friend who replaced William Eagles, seems doubtful about the idea of a parallel purge, and has showed considerable commitment to Quaker process.

Moreover, unlike in Indiana, the NCYM Faith and Practice contains no provision giving the yearly meeting authority to discipline or expel member meetings, particularly on grounds of heresy. Indeed, although staunchly Christian in outlook, the text states at least three times that it is not to be regarded as a creed.

Then not least, after an initial period of shock, several of the targeted meetings have proved quite capable of standing up for themselves, as we shall see.

For that matter, the condition of some of those demanding "unity" and adherence to the "core beliefs" of the NCYM Faith and Practice present some jarring anomalies.

VI

Consider for instance Poplar Ridge. Its website includes the meeting's own "Statement of Faith," which at the end, notes that it is "adapted from the Doctrinal Statement of Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends." This is intriguing because it is not only imported from another yearly meeting, but from a different branch of Friends. (Read it here: <http://bit.ly/1FLaYJ>)

Then consider its worship calendar. As this issue was prepared, the Poplar Ridge website was drenched in a celebration of Lent: “Experience Lent at the Ridge . . .40 Days, 40 Ways”; this was the bold headline on the home page. It also included a bouncy lenten music video.

Which is interesting not only because of the sharp contrast to the traditional Quaker avoidance of “special days”, but also because Lent is an invention of the Catholic church, and a key season of the Catholic liturgical calendar. (To be sure, Lent has of late been dipped and scrubbed in a Southern Baptist baptismal font, and the denomination’s Lifeway bookstores are packed with Lent-themed “resources.” Who would have thought?)

Turn next to Poplar Ridge’s adult religious education efforts: for an ongoing women’s class, it uses courses and materials by Beth Moore, a Southern Baptist, whose home church excludes women from its ruling body of elders. This too departs from the equal status of women in Quaker ministry. (But then, the Catholic Church and its lenten devotions are also led by an all-male priesthood.) For a mixed class they use work by another popular Southern Baptist pastor and writer, David Platt.

In short, while elsewhere in the yearly meeting Poplar Ridge sternly denounces outside involvements, in its own circle they are chockablock with them: mostly Southern Baptist, but also refurbished Catholic, and a yearly meeting 3000 miles away and from another branch, among others.

In theory a liberal Quaker would shrug at such external explorations: seeking truth wherever it might be found is par for the course.

Yet one wonders if Poplar Ridge could be persuaded that what’s fair for them is fair for other meetings; or is it a privilege that comes with the assurance of correct doctrine?

And amid this variety, one strong grey strand is strangely absent: a review of pastor Mercadante’s monthly letters, and the meeting newsletter, shows a striking absence of the names of any Quaker worthies beyond the congregation: in reviewing more than a year’s worth of material, this reader was unable to find even one mention of George Fox, Margaret Fell, any other prominent early Friend, never mind the pillars of evangelical Quakerism: no Gurney, no Allen Jay, no Lindley Hoag, no Sybil Jones, Levi

Coffin, Walter or Emma Malone, or even that spectral presence, the Richmond Declaration.

Likewise absent were references to the broad array of Quaker alphabet groups: no FWCC, EFI, ESR, FCNL, FUM, AFSC, USFW, Quaker Volunteer Witness, Right Sharing, the Africa Great Lakes Initiative, et al.

Nor did Carolina Friends bodies fare any better: no mention of Guilford College, or the state's other Quaker schools, Friends Homes, Quaker House, Friends Disaster Service, Mowa, not even the renowned Snow Camp historical drama. The only exceptions were the occasional reference to the yearly meeting

Indeed, in all the available pages of the Poplar Ridge Newsletter, the term "Quaker" seemed to have only two recurring associations: one was with a lake, as many events were held at Quaker Lake Camp; the other was barbecue, which is regularly produced by their "Quaker Men" to raise money for the building fund. (Well, it beats oatmeal.)

Finally, one other feature of most other Quaker groups was also missing from the Poplar Ridge newsletters, what is generally called "Social Concern," and to which NCYM has assigned not one but two committees, Christian Ethics & Morals, and Peace.

To be fair, this area was not entirely overlooked. In his letter of August, 2014, David Mercadante faced one such issue head-on: "What Is The Purpose of Marriage?" was the title.

His answer, which was somewhat disjointed, had to do with becoming holy. He predictably denounced same sex marriage, which then seemed likely to be headed for legalization in Carolina, and concluded that "The national conversation about marriage is one of the most important topics of our day."

It's easy to agree with that last statement. But acknowledging that there were other "important topics" of social concern only highlighted the lack of any of them in his other online letters.

One would, for instance, never know from reading them that the U.S., including North Carolina, was in the grip of a murderous epidemic of gun violence. Or that poverty had increased, or that more black men are in prison today than were enslaved before the Civil War.

Or, speaking of peace, that the U.S. was involved in several wars (with more looming), which have exacted a toll among

Carolina troops of almost 1500 killed and wounded just from Iraq and Afghanistan, and many more suffering PTSD and other invisible wounds.

Are none of these, except same sex marriage, worth mentioning in pastoral letters or newsletters at Poplar Ridge?

(Oh, by the way—the reference to battle in the quote from one of Mercadante’s letters earlier in this report? That was actually about Christmas. Mercadante was comparing the birth of Jesus to the D-Day invasion of 1944.)

So, has Quakerism been boiled down to barbecue at the lake? One wonders. The nearly total absence of any Quaker content in the recent Poplar Ridge community discourse brings to mind a passage from their initial letter last summer:

Meetings, just like any organization, are going to shift with each passing generation. No meeting is perfectly static. As a matter of integrity, a meeting should discern if it no longer shares the convictions of her original founding. If a meeting finds itself out of unity with the Faith and Practice which is originally affirmed, they should be honest in their assessment and seek other denominational affiliation.

Who has shifted the most here? An honest assessment, indeed.

VII

The annual sessions assault soon claimed its first scalp: on September 7, Fancy Gap Friends adopted a minute, which declared:

It is with a profound sense of sadness that Fancy Gap Friends Meeting has reached the decision to sever our relationship with NCYM. We have seen a fundamental change within North Carolina Yearly Meeting over the past years, as it has chosen a path that we think has turned the body further and further away from Quakerism in thought, conduct, execution of business, and most grievous, in Spirit. We have remained in relationship with

NCYM far beyond our ease and comfort, simply in an attempt to be faithful in waiting, to work for the change that we seek, and to bring what portion of Light we might have to our gathered union. Our attempts have repeatedly met with resistance, either in the form of being completely ignored, to outright hostility. . . .

One down, only a handful more to go. Were Poplar Ridge and its allies on a roll?

Maybe. As the autumn advanced, the New Committee, charged with figuring out what to do with the fallout from the annual session outburst, added members from each of the yearly meeting's nine Quarters, and sent out a questionnaire to gain a sense of the sentiment in the meetings at large.

So wheels were turning, but on closer inspection the road to an Indiana divorce began to look less direct and perhaps more bumpy than the insurgents had hoped.

For one thing, there were responses to the summer letters from various directions. One particularly eloquent riposte came from High Point Meeting, which has not been among the targeted group. They sent a letter of September 28, 2014, in which they made plain that they were no "liberals":

We are Orthodox Friends, who love Scripture and claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, but we cannot unite with the kind of future being claimed by some members of our Yearly Meeting.

We acknowledge long lasting differences that have led to divisions within our Yearly Meeting. . . .

But then plainly called out the Poplar Ridge putsch for what it was:

However, we are disturbed by the judgmental and domineering approach taken by some Friends. While Friends call for theological unity, we fear the strategic aims are to marginalize some members of the Yearly Meeting and form a kind of "unity" through divisions or expulsions. It is our concern that this forceful and divisive approach will threaten vital ministries of our Yearly Meeting, splinter some local meetings,

and alienate some members from their meetings. . . .

Further, High Point firmly rejected the notion that either the NCYM Faith & Practice or the Bible, highly as they esteemed both, were meant to be the “ultimate authority” for the body.

Concerning Faith & Practice: A question the “new committee” is asked to address is “should our Faith and Practice be the ultimate authority in our beliefs and practice and be affirmed by all member meetings?” As we see it, the role of Faith and Practice in a non-creedal society is unique. It is our best effort (“though we see through the glass darkly”) to give a sense of who we are and what we believe. It advises Friends on how to function as Christ’s community. However, it is not authoritative or final. While it informs our corporate identity and public witness, Friends have often declared that no statements or doctrines can substitute for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To require Friends to “affirm” a Faith and Practice as the criteria for membership, in our estimation, makes it creed and the “letter of the law”

They were even more trenchant regarding the Bible:

We join Friends who hold the Scriptures in high regard, yet we are uncertain by what Friends mean by “Biblical authority.” The Bible is subject to human translation, interpretation, and application. For centuries, “Biblical authority” has been used by political leaders to justify wars, slavery, genocide, colonization, and other ungodly enterprise. Most pertinent to our concern for North Carolina Yearly Meeting is the way people use the language of “Biblical authority” to pass judgment and condemnation on others, deny individuals of God-given dignity and grace, silence the voices of women, and implement a spiritual legalism of fear versus love. We also observe that some Christians who insist on “Biblical authority” practice it in selective ways. Many uphold parts of Scripture that support their positions, while ignoring other parts. What do Friends mean by “Biblical authority?” How will Friends determine what is authoritative? Who will

make this determination?

Who indeed? And how? These are questions that are two thousand years old, with no “ultimate” answers yet.

High Point was almost impatient with the query about outside organizations:

“Why do meetings feel compelled to participate with organizations outside of NCYM?” Quakers are not isolationists. Our ministries are enriched when we participate with other Quaker, ecumenical, service, and mission organizations for numerous reasons.

And instead of setting deadlines, they urged the critics and the yearly meeting to take a more traditional approach:

“Gospel order” is the Biblical inspiration for the Quaker tradition of eldering. The current Faith and Practice urges Friends to follow the “gospel order” when dealing with conflicts between members and meetings Should this not also apply when dealing with conflicts among Yearly Meeting entities? Have we in North Carolina Yearly Meeting practiced gospel order? How have we sought to reconcile the community?

While calm and traditionalist throughout, the High Point letter was a compelling demolition of the Poplar Ridge case.

And it was not alone.

VIII

Some of the other targeted meetings began to respond on their own behalf. Of these none followed the example of Fancy Gap, which was the smallest of the liberal groups.

The largest, New Garden, seems clear that after 260 years among Friends, it is not going anywhere.

Similarly Spring Meeting, at 240 years and counting, seemed not to be intimidated.

In its bucolic setting amid dairy farms, Spring did not imagine

itself a cutting edge group. Nevertheless, it had reached some clear conclusions in recent years that set it apart from other meetings in its area: for one, a decade ago it had stopped employing a pastor, opting for a programmed, nonpastoral style which it felt was more traditionally Quaker.

And for another, they soon decided they needed to broaden their Quaker contacts, and joined the Piedmont Friends Fellowship.

For a third, as a family-oriented group, the members found themselves drawn to welcome a same sex couple with two children who began attending, as one more family among their number.

And then in 2012, when North Carolina conservatives pushed for a constitutional amendment to ban same sex marriage in the state (even though it was already illegal), Spring Friends were drawn to oppose it publicly, by placing a small ad in a county newspaper.

Add these together, and the rural white clapboard church was deemed dangerously liberal, even intolerably radical by those determined to obtain “unity” on such matters come what may. The conservative pastor of a nearby meeting attempted to have Spring laid down by its Quarterly Meeting for these “offenses”; but the effort failed.

And Spring Friends were not thrown off balance by the summer assault. Indeed, their response to the demand for the meeting’s expulsion, issued two weeks after Fancy Gap’s withdrawal, was quite firm, yet unruffled:

Regardless of the efforts by some to enforce either strict conformity or separation— which only serves to divide, to ostracize, to cast out, our meeting chooses instead to continue to remain a member of this yearly meeting, to seek harmony, not division. We do not consider differences of beliefs among us as threats, but as opportunities for spiritual growth in a world full of God-created diversity. We shall remain. We seek to speak Truth to Power, and to act by the Golden Rule, after the example of Jesus Christ. We do not demand conformity of others, nor do we seek to be bound by expectations of conformity by others. We place little significance in professions of faith. We ask only to be judged by our actions.

“We shall remain.” Thus Spring threw down a gauntlet, yet did so without bluster or bravado: they rejected the purge effort, and set out to resist it simply by continuing to be who they are, and doing what they do.

At the same time, they presented a sharp critique of the rationale behind the Poplar Ridge-led drive, which is worth examining here in some detail:

We believe that unity is best achieved by embracing of our diversity and, not through the cleavage of our association from others over doctrinal matters. We care not what an individual or congregation claims to profess, placing our highest regard on what they practice. For words, as we have witnessed, often mean little and are callously cast about by some. As George Fox stated, it is not what one professes that is of importance, but what one practices. We shall judge, and ask to be judged ourselves, by the actions of an individual or congregation. It is curious to hear others within our yearly meeting speak of unifying the meeting by use of exclusion and division, by attempting to cast out those with which they perceive do not agree with their absolutist interpretation of Scripture, their world view of social issues of the Day. Within the history of the Society of Friends, as with other faiths, this strategy has repeatedly been applied, only to lead to more division, more misunderstanding, and a distraction away from the true charge of our Faith. That true charge is to demonstrate by our ACTIONS, the love for our fellow persons after the example of Jesus Christ. . . .

They also challenged the idea that a purge would strengthen NCYM:

We believe that each past schism has weakened our society and inhibited that cause of practicing the example of Jesus Christ. Each current branch of our Society has carried away some strength from the original Society, but has also abandoned some valuable attribute, to its

detriment, to another branch. So it will be again if those professing unity through division carry the day. We embrace all branches of the Religious Society of Friends, that diversity begets strength and vitality as we strive to learn from and appreciate one another. . . .

They went on to deconstruct the rhetoric about how the liberal groups were betraying “founding beliefs”:

The “Founding Beliefs” of North Carolina Yearly Meeting: A common theme and quote in many of the recent letters from meetings has been their expectation of adherence to the “founding beliefs” of NCYM. This is a most interesting statement. For the record, North Carolina Yearly Meeting was first organized in the late 17th century, with the first formal gathering deemed a yearly meeting being held in 1697. The Religious Society of Friends and NCYM were founded during that century on the principles that each and every person could have a direct and personal relationship with God, that there was no need for what Fox and other early Friends termed hireling priests, our charge being to “walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone”. The increased emphasis on Biblical supremacy as compared to the leading of the Holy Spirit was not a founding principle.

And not least, echoing High Point, they not only defended their association with an “outside” group, but affirmed it positively:

Association with other Friends' organizations: Our meeting is a member of Piedmont Friends Fellowship (PFF) Our reason for having affiliations with both organizations is to bridge the chasm that unnecessarily exists between these two branches of the Society of Friends, each of which lacks a beneficial aspect of the other. While some members of each organization, particularly within NCYM, seek to widen this chasm and hold no association with the other, we seek a meaningful unity among Friends that such an affiliation can foster.

Articulate, trenchant responses such as Spring's and High Point's to the demand for their departure have gone unanswered, at least in print, by the challengers. But on November 1, as the NCYM Fall Representative Body session assembled, the general response was still clear and unchanged: the Liberals and universalists must go.

IX

The body gathered at Forsyth Friends in Winston-Salem. The meeting room was full, and the purge voices were loud. But they were not unchallenged. And before we get to that, there was other business that came first which deserves mention, dealing with the last of the Four Ms we began with: money.

NCYM is close to being broke, summed up the report. Three staff members had left, and at least two were not being replaced. Programs were being cut back. The pension fund for retired pastors was woefully underfunded. (And the pensions themselves were miserly in any case: a maximum of \$450 per month after 30 years service.)

Further, the YM could no longer afford to offer health insurance to pastors. A decade or so ago, in the flush old days, the YM paid for a pastors' health plan; it was a perk. Then the crunch came: costs went steadily up, requirements were raised; and as membership dropped, there was less money to pay the premiums. Many pastors were older, prone to pre-existing conditions and other health issues of age. This also made group coverage harder to find. (Does any of this sound familiar to readers?)

And now, finally, the axe fell: it was announced that the YM could simply no longer afford or find suitable insurance, and was dropping its pastors' health plan entirely.

Yet all was not lost, a committee member assured the group. Rather than being left entirely adrift, pastors formerly on the plan could now seek coverage through "the new arrangements," and many would likely find better coverage there at lower rates.

"The new arrangements?" Irony dripped from this carefully elliptical statement like grease from hot ribs.

For what was being alluded to was the Health-Plan-That-Dare-

Not-Speak-Its-Name, the monster that most of those in the room had been told (and believed) for years would spell the end of democracy and the doom of civilization; the program that all successful political candidates in their region swore up and down they would smash and destroy utterly at the very first opportunity.

Yes: These overwhelmingly conservative pastors were now being told to sign up for Obamacare. And to further sour their dispositions, same sex marriage had become legal in North Carolina, by court order, and such weddings had been happening for two weeks.

So when the “New Committee” brought in a set of proposals after lunch, the race was on. There were five, the first dealt with how all meetings could remain in NCYM and produce “effective ministry”; then, whether the Faith & Practice should be the “ultimate authority” in belief and practice, and be affirmed by all meetings; the third asked why some meetings “feel compelled to participate with organizations outside of NCYM”; next, that meetings were expected to support the YM financially; if a meeting didn’t pay, its members shouldn’t be eligible for YM committees or offices.

Then, the final, bottom line one, #5, asked what might a “restructured or even divided yearly meeting look like?”

All the answers were mostly vague and subject to interpretation, as in fact they had been before: “All meetings should accept the same core spiritual beliefs as set forth” in Faith & Practice; but with no indication of which statements in the book’s 150 pages of text embodied this “core.”

Likewise, Faith & Practice should be “affirmed” with special reference to the Richmond Declaration of Faith, a document from 1887 contained in it, yet the Committee added that “it should be made clear that affirmation of Faith & Practice does not establish a creed.” (Which, we noted earlier, the text itself states three different times.)

Which would seem to say that the ultimate authority states that its text is not to be taken as the ultimate authority. This is a traditional Quaker view, but one unlikely to satisfy the “unity” advocates.

As for participation in outside groups, the committee noted that meetings responded “in a variety of ways.” But it also pointed out

what had been only recently learned: the Piedmont Friends Fellowship was about to create an adjunct body in the form of a Yearly Meeting, for those of its members which wanted to join one. They were not pleased by this:

Also, the New Committee is aware that a few of our monthly meetings are considering becoming members of another yearly meeting which represents one of the other major divisions among the Religious Society of Friends. The New Committee recommends that no monthly meeting member of NCYM should become a member of any other major division of the Religious Society of Friends.

As for what a “restructured or even divided yearly meeting” might look like, they punted: merely listed some possibilities, from variations on the status quo to complete dissolution and distribution of all properties and assets and all meetings would “go their separate ways”; with no recommendation for which to choose, if any. They urged committees study the various options.

This was not good enough for the “unity” caucus. There were loud voices saying that one way or another, within a year the YM would be significantly smaller. There was also a fierce personal assault on the character of a woman Friend who had been proposed for the Executive Committee. She had been part of one liberal meeting, the now-departed Fancy Gap, but had transferred to New Garden – jumping from Satan’s frying pan into the Anti-Christ’s fire.

But there was also pushback. Friends from Winston-Salem, New Garden and Spring all spoke up on their own behalf, generally more irenically than their antagonists. One woman in her 80s, from a conservative meeting, unexpectedly joined them, expressing shock and indignation at the Poplar Ridge push, calling it unprecedented, unnecessary, and out of order.

Even so, the differences remained. After one of the hardline pastors declaimed about the critical importance of clinging to Jesus above all, the pastor of one of the targeted meetings, Deborah Seuss of Greensboro First Friends, rose to respond. She was a hundred percent with her colleague regarding devotion to Jesus,

she said. “But,” she added, “I wonder if you may not want to be in fellowship with me, because I’m willing to marry same sex couples.” A good question.

Regarding the item about financial support for the YM, a member of Spring Meeting stood to make a special point: when that meeting decided to drop out of the pastoral system, and revert to a more traditional Quaker worship style, they calculated that portion of the YM dues which goes to support the pastoral structure, and have subtracted it from their annual contributions. They have also sent in explanations of why they did so. The reduced contribution was not, they insisted, a protest, but a change. (It is also a change specifically provided for in the current Faith & Practice.)

Three other targeted meetings had also been holding back on their expected contributions. Winston-Salem was one, but its member said they didn’t have the money: their membership was elderly and declining, and income with it.

New Garden was another “tax resister,” but their motivation was different. Several years ago, they felt led to record a lesbian member as a minister. When they brought this report to their Quarterly Meeting, she and they were subjected, they say, to torrents of abuse. The meeting’s holding back of contributions, wise or not, was indeed a protest against what they saw as unfair and un-christian treatment. But one of their members, Max Carter, told the group that New Garden was reconsidering this action. (The third meeting we will hear from in a moment.)

The chorus of scorn aimed at those who had not paid their full expected amount had a curious aspect: to paraphrase, it sounded like this: *“You’re all spawn of Satan, doing the devil’s work, abetting the collapse of marriage and civilization, and well along the highway to hell. But before you pass into perdition – don’t forget to keep sending us money. In fact, send us some more.”*

That is a paraphrase, remember, but fair to the way these calls came across. And as a fundraising pitch, one cannot but conclude that *Pay us more so we can keep on demonizing and tormenting you* lacks much persuasive appeal.

This writer has read about masochists who pay others to beat and abuse them. But what is known of the targeted NCYM meetings strongly suggests that they are not cut from such cloth. At

the very least, those making such demands ought to consider whether something more like: *pay up, and we'll at least pretend to respect you, the way a trained server in a restaurant does*, would not go over better.

This concern was stated more strikingly by Ken Bradstock, the Clerk of Fancy Gap Friends, in what might be called an “exit interview.” Bradstock, who has considerable social work experience, noted that this experience had much to do with why their meeting had withheld its small payments from the yearly meeting. At stake, he stated

... are not only theological standards but behavioral standards as well. It is not so much theology we dispute but behavior.

Over the last decade, we have seen members and meetings of NCYM (FUM) display cruelty and meanness in their behavior toward Friends with whom they disagree. We can document those behaviors including a Surry Quarterly meeting wherein our pastor and his wife were harangued for 2 hours with judgments of their character, faithfulness to Christ, and eternal destination to hell. The other incidents will not be described here because we are attempting to keep the tone of this letter positive and healthy. That incident is only meant to be representative of the numerous that we have experienced and have heard about. This kind of behavior feels like a direct violation of the only standard we know of that describes true followers of Jesus Christ.

The only judgment we feel is our place to make is whether this chronic behavior represents a sick institution with harmful behavior. We believe that North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends (FUM) is dysfunctional and very much in need of help. We know this by the behavior we observe not through the abstractions of theology. We see cruelty, meanness, manipulation, hostility and codependency. We are not just pointing a finger at those who attack us theologically but those who permit this behavior as well. As most readers know, the family of an alcoholic can be as responsible for the continuation of the disease as the victim himself. We believe that even those in NCYM with whom we align theologically have failed to confront the institution's illness and are complicit as well.

By the end of the November Representative Body session, the new Committee's first four vague recommendations were approved. The New Committee was told to bring further guidance about the fifth point, on restructuring, to the next Representative Body session in March.

But the temporizing on that last item was not for lack of understanding. Rather it was because Item #5 set in front of the group the choice that would actually move them beyond talk: is the YM really going to expel the targeted group of meetings for heresy? Is there in fact sufficient resolve to "pull the trigger"?

It is one thing to bluster about a split; it is another to actually force one to occur. If some are ready, how do they plan to get around the lack of authority in Faith & Practice to do it? And the voices of those not in unity with it? (The Southern Baptist way is to pack the house, and the electioneer like mad, because decisions are made by majority vote. That is not the Quaker way, though clearly Poplar Ridge and their allies hope to make it so.)

Events since November have heightened the stakes, at least rhetorically. Consider:

New Garden Meeting decided in November that it will join the new Piedmont Friends Yearly Meeting, the one affiliated with the much-maligned Friends General Conference, – but New Garden is *not* leaving NCYM. It will maintain the dual affiliation. This, of course, is in direct contravention of the New Committee's advice.

Over at First Friends, pastor Deborah Seuss made good her statement at the Representative body meeting, and conducted a same sex wedding there in December.

And Spring, as threatened, has carried on as usual, not paying for yearly meeting pastoral expenses; welcoming LGBT attenders and members; and even reading aloud passages from Universalist Quaker author Phil Gulley.

All these are red flags to Poplar Ridge and its allies: *We are still who we are, still doing what we do.* What are you going to make of it?

Not far beneath the surface of this interplay is one more dimension of the YM's plight which went unspoken at the November 1 session, but has been made plain to me since then:

A decision in March, or even later, to expel the targeted meetings, would not be the end of the story. As one well-placed and well-informed Friend put it: “they have been told that if they force a split, the only ones to benefit will be the lawyers.”

And here is another difference between the Indiana scenario and Carolina: Fancy Gap is gone, but the other targeted groups have made clear that they will not voluntarily leave. And without YM authority to force them out, such a coup attempt would be ideal for creating a big payday for lawyers.

Nor is that all. There are several million dollars in NCYM trust funds, to which members from all the meetings have donated. And then there is Quaker Lake Camp. Southeast of Greensboro. The money is plenty to litigate over; but Quaker Lake is 104 lovely acres of potential trouble.

The camp is fifty years old, and has roots of labor, money, and family involvement sunk deep throughout the YM. Families from New Garden and First Friends were there at the beginning, donating not only money but time and sweat, and then sending their kids for summer bliss. But not only kids. We noted earlier how often Poplar Ridge holds events there; the same goes for Spring and dozens of other meetings.

Indiana YM had a camp too; but it was less embedded in the hearts of all the meetings. Quaker Lake is different. The idea that the liberal meetings can be forced out, perhaps given a settlement from the trust funds as a sop, then be expected to simply walk away from the YM and Quaker Lake – that’s a pipe dream.

Moreover, unless the YM suddenly decides in March to expel the targeted groups and somehow makes it stick, whatever outcome does come to pass will take months or years. And then two of the insurgent leaders will face a stark choice: both Poplar Ridge and Plainfield have vowed to withhold their YM contributions beginning in April of this year, unless their kind of “unity” is delivered by then.

Yet if they cut off the checks, under the rules changes they just demanded and got, their members would lose eligibility for YM committees and offices, and their leverage would diminish markedly. Cutting off their noses to spite their faces is a phrase that comes to mind.

But if they back off and keep paying – then they’ve blinked.

And that will increase the likelihood that NCYM may simply muddle through, staying together amid the tensions of culture and theology that it encompasses.

Evidently Poplar Ridge, Plainfield and the others would regard this outcome as a great defeat for their hopes of turning the YM structure into a support machine for their kind of evangelism-centered programs. So at this writing, the situation remains highly volatile.

Which is too bad. Because given the strains in American society these days, any group that can manage to stay together across as broad a spectrum of belief and practice as NCYM encompasses is something of a wonder, or maybe even a miracle. And perhaps authentically Christian.

It would be a prime example of the wisdom of Galatians 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in that fulfill the law of Christ.” For is it not the case that these differences are a big piece of the “burden” of religious life in these times?

The standard American response today is to flee it, and take refuge in monocultural enclaves; certainly most nonpastoral liberal Quakers do that.

But is that the correct response? The Quaker Christian response? Or would facing and learning to manage such diversity and the tensions it brings be more aligned with our actual calling? High Point Friends’ letter may have said this best:

We remind Friends that North Carolina Yearly Meeting and its work belong to God; we are simply His stewards. God is the one who joined this body together, although imperfect and diverse, to reflect His glory and achieve His purposes. The opportunity is now before us to reflect God's power of love and spirit of reconciliation by how we tend to the differences and conflicts among us.

Whatever happens on March 7, the outcome of this struggle will depend on a number of variables. Two which seem crucial can be put as queries:

Will the clerking of the sessions be honest and faithfully Quaker?

And will more of those in the targeted meetings heed Ken

Bradstock's counsel, and break with passive complicity in their own victimization? A number of the targeted Friends have spoken up valiantly on their own behalf. But too few.

Quaker Theology will follow the course of NCYM-FUM as it grapples with these and related questions in the months to come.

Maybe the road it is on does lead to Indiana.
But then again, maybe not.

APPENDIX:

Links to Letters From Meeting Demanding
Expulsion or Disciplinary Action
Against Meetings With Which They Differ –
And Some Responses

Letters of Demand:

Bethesda Friends:

<http://quakertheology.org/Bethesda-Letter.pdf>

Deep Creek Meeting:

<http://quakertheology.org/Deep-Creek-Friends.pdf>

Forbush Friends:

<http://quakertheology.org/Forbush-Friends-08-2014.pdf>

Hopewell Friends:

<http://quakertheology.org/Hopewell-Friends-NCYM-08-2014.pdf>

Pine Hill Friends:

<http://quakertheology.org/Pine-Hill-Friends-NCYM-08-3024.pdf>

Plainfield Friends:

<http://quakertheology.org/Plainfield-Letter-ALL.pdf>

Poplar Ridge Friends:

<http://quakertheology.org/Poplar-Ridge-Friends-NCYM-FUM.pdf>

Ron Selleck:

<http://quakertheology.org/Selleck-Ltr-07-2014.pdf>

Southview Friends:

<http://quakertheology.org/Southview.pdf>

Ken Spivey:

<http://quakertheology.org/Spivey-Letter.pdf>

York-Holly Springs:

<http://quakertheology.org/Yorks-Holly-Spgs.pdf>

Responses:

Fancy Gap-Departure Minute:

<http://quakertheology.org/Fancy-Gap-Quit-Letter-reformat.pdf>

Fancy Gap - Joining New YM:

<http://quakertheology.org/Fancy-Gap-New-YM.pdf>

Ken Bradstock Comments:

<http://quakertheology.org/Bradstock-Comments-Dysfunction.pdf>

High Point friends:

<http://quakertheology.org/High-Point-Kellum.pdf>

Spring Friends Letter

<http://quakertheology.org/Spring-Letter-All-New.pdf>

Spring Friends, “New Committee” Survey Responses:

<http://quakertheology.org/Spring-Response-Survey-All.pdf>

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