

Query 6: Education

How can we most effectively foster a spirit of inquiry and a loving and understanding attitude toward life?

As Friends we seem to have a few things that fall under the concept of “story.” Godly Play centers on stories that enrich the children’s lives and give them tools to ask questions. Also, sharing our own faith journeys and stories with one another helps us, as well as becoming more aware of the stories in the Bible and in Quaker history. In the past year, we’ve developed a rich foundation for the children, and maybe this next year, we’ll be called to develop a similar foundation for ourselves.

In addition, there seems to be a relationship between the community and the individual, as in the case of one Friend who faces trying circumstances these days: Even in difficulty, by loving one another and helping one another stay open to God, we may retain a sense of love and openness toward life, despite difficulty. We also continue to affirm “There is but one who can speak to your condition: Christ Jesus.” We are called to bring each other to the Inner Teacher.

The spirit of inquiry is itself focused on questioning and that’s what brings many of us here: Quakerism fosters a spirit of inquiry and a loving understanding, to be ourselves as Quakers.

What effort are we making to become better acquainted with the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, our Judeo-Christian heritage, the history and principles of Friends, and the contributions of other religions and philosophies to our spiritual heritage?

We acknowledge we have not made very much effort in this regard. A few of us have been involved in a weekly “Mom’s Bible Study,” apart from Laughing Waters. Perhaps that has infused us in some way. Also for some of us, we yearn to look at the Bible from a radical perspective, where it really came from, it’s root. That seems to be missing from our group.

Can we challenge ourselves to live out the first section of the Advice? What can we learn of Jesus’ washing the feet of the lepers? What of the story of loaves and fishes? Also, by studying the history of Quakers who enslaved people and the abolition movement that evolved, what can we learn about how we are in the world today?

Similarly, as we pay attention to the traditions and holidays of other communities, we notice they are all around us and we can take advantage of that, learning about them, engaging in certain practices, teaching them to our children (e.g. Ramadan, the feast of Eid).

Speaking about our own faith journey might help us understand what we each have gleaned from the practices, customs, and teachings of the spiritual and religious communities to which we have been exposed. For some of us, it’s been good to read through Quaker writings (Thomas Hamm, John Punshon, Paul Lacey, Lloyd Lee Wilson, and others) and see what speaks to our condition. We need to remember the Inner Light, the Inward Teacher, Jesus—and to

make God the center of what we do as the center of the inquiry. That helps us avoid placing our own good thoughts at the center of our faith.

We must be careful to test what has Life for us. We heard from a Friend the caution that drawing narrowly and solely from Quaker tradition and history may have an unintended consequence of increasing stiff and stodgy false personas: "The letter killeth but the Spirit giveth Life." We pray that as we seek to be intentional about how we draw on Biblical interpretation and Quaker history, that we do so with life, playfulness, and humility while also recognizing some of the shadows we might be creating.

So much of our history is considered intellectually and not emotionally or spiritually as the Advice mentions. Our challenge may be to bring our experiential learning and our learning from the heart more to the fore. Lectio Divina may be a method to help us in this manner and keep us from being stodgy or prescriptive. And we recognize that individual learning and self-study brings forward different gifts of the Spirit than does study as a group.

In what ways can we encourage an educational process that is consistent with the values Friends cherish? How do gender-based expectations affect the goals we set and the way we learn?

Our values are embedded in today's institutions and social structures that are impacted by social class. Research is coming forward that indicates that all children have a certain potential and can live into that potential when they have access to rich and varied opportunities. As a result, some of us begin to question if private Quaker education truly speaks to the testimony of equality: is quality education a right or a privilege? We may be required to dig more deeply as to our role in social CHANGE and not just pursue the opportunity to pluck the most promising kids out of poor neighborhoods, give them scholarships to fine schools, and rest on our laurels of being able to provide a rigorous Quaker education to so few.

Tying in with Friends' values, how do we encourage a FREE educational process? That can help us look at our responsibility to work towards social change. When education isn't free, especially for vocational education, then education becomes about job training, not about a broader education of life, our place in the world, and how to reach our fullest potential. Are we lacking education to help us look at our own broader condition?

Do we take an active and supportive interest in schools, libraries and other educational resources in our communities and elsewhere? How do we prepare ourselves and our children to play active roles in a changing world?

(This part of the query was left unanswered, as we moved into discussing how to support one of our attenders who has been facing great difficulty.)