

Report for Central Committee

Issues of Race at the 2016 Gathering: Steps Taken & Additional Considerations

Authors: Frank Barch, Presiding Clerk and Barry Crossno, General Secretary

Reviewer: Jean-Marie P. Barch

Date: August 10, 2016

Preface

Almost 1,000 Friends from the United States, Canada, and around the world came to the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota July 3-8 for the 2016 FGC Gathering. From the opening message shared Sunday evening by Barry Crossno, the General Secretary of FGC, naming concerns of Friends of color about white supremacy, FGC and the Gathering, through the vocal ministry of Peggy Senger Morrison on Friday evening and everything in between, this was a Gathering that was challenging, joyous, troubled, deep, spiritual, and much more.

This year's theme was "be humble, Be Faithful, BE BOLD." Gathering attendees were humbled as we were challenged to face, despite our ongoing work and statements on matters of race and power, that we who comprise FGC, even in Gathering planning, often default to a position of meeting the needs of our primarily white constituents instead of moving toward actions that will make the safety and full participation of all races and ethnicities more likely.

What Happened

For the past few years, FGC has hosted a pre-conference for Friends of Color. The intention of this event is create an opportunity for Friends of Color to gather together in fellowship prior to the start of the Gathering. For many of these Friends, they may be the only person of color in their local Quaker meeting. Therefore, meeting together is an important way to feel supported as there can be challenges in being the only Friend of Color in a predominantly white setting. The pre-conference is also valuable because it creates a web of support among Friends of Color so that they feel more empowered to engage with the entire Gathering community, which is predominantly white. Distressingly, a number of Friends of Color experienced micro-aggressions and harassment from campus security after arriving for the pre-conference. There were reports that campus security followed some Friends of Color through parking lots and that security also surveilled and profiled them in various ways. This made these Friends deeply uncomfortable for reason everyone can understand. No one should ever be treated this way—and it's made even more egregious given these Friends were making a financial and time commitment to go on a spiritual retreat.

What this episode lifted up with great clarity is that the Gathering often locates itself in places where Friends of Color have had negative experiences either on campus or in the surrounding community. Friends of Color have lifted up for more than a decade that this is a very real and serious problem and that FGC has failed to concretely and successfully address the situation. This has been a systemic failure over a long period of time and it must change. While FGC has tried to find historically black colleges in the past to host us, or find more diverse urban campuses where Friends of Color might feel safer, it's also true that we have not succeeded in doing so. There have been reasons cited as to why, but regardless of the whys we must find a solution so that the Gathering becomes a safe container for all Friends, not just white Friends. One glaring problem is there have been no Friends of Color involved in site selection. Friends of Color must have a more direct role in site selection and have positions of authority within the structure of FGC. This Gathering has brought into stark relief that FGC as an institution must find a way forward so that we can become the community we have been working and praying to become.

Steps Taken So Far

During the Gathering, the first step was for our Gathering Coordinator and several Friends of Color to engage with our host about how security is being handled. The report that the General Secretary received was that the meeting went well. The Benedictine Sisters and the administration have a commitment to hospitality and were concerned to learn that Friends within our community were having a negative experience. It was agreed that patrols would be lessened. Also, they volunteered to move some of their security patrols out of cars and into golf carts or on to foot in an effort to lessen their own visibility and try to create a more comfortable space for Friends. We appreciated the campus hearing our concerns and taking steps to try to create a more hospitable and safer feeling environment for all Friends for the remainder of our time there. The above was also a new learning for us as organizers. While we often have talks with campus security before the Gathering about various issues, we want to more proactively suggest to future campuses ways that their security units can reduce their visibility and create a greater feeling of welcome and safety for all Friends.

As agreed during the Gathering by a number of FGC clerks, the General Secretary and several Friends of Color, the composition of the Gathering Site Selection committee was changed after the Gathering so that it now includes Friends of Color. Four such Friends have now been confirmed to serve. This means that the Site Selection Committee will have a majority membership of Friends of Color. Our hope, coupled with committed effort, is that this results in future sites, after Niagara (which is already contracted), that support safe and positive experiences for Friends of Color. We are grateful to the Friends of Color who made this issue clear as well as to those Friends of Color who have agreed to serve. We also wish to thank the previous and continuing members of the Site Selection Committee for their devoted service and a number of other Friends on Central Committee for acting with speed and conviction in the week after the Gathering to help make this change.

For Our Discernment

In addition to the above steps already taken, many Friends at the Gathering and beyond have encouraged FGC to engage in an institutional audit that will help FGC “identify and provide recommendations to correct any structural racism or implicit bias within the organization.”¹

The issue of an institutional audit had been brought to a number of Clerks and the General Secretary in the spring of this year by our Ministry on Racism Fellow, Richie Schulz, among others. We were told the price was \$19,000 and that it would require time from individuals across the organization. At the time, we were faced with the need to make significant budget cuts. Further, staff and volunteers were feeling very stretched by all the changes presently underway. After discussion, it was felt by a number of Friends, including a couple of Friends who are involved in anti-racism work and very involved in FGC, that this was something important to consider after this fiscal year and after the implementation of the many changes that are pressing on this organization. In other words, this year was not the time for an institutional audit. This was shared with some of the Friends who were advocating the audit. As you might guess, they were not in unity with our assessment.

Given what happened at the Gathering and the very public discussions that occurred around it, Friends in support of an institutional audit once again lifted it for consideration. The General Secretary, Presiding Clerk and others concurred publically that it should receive consideration. Some Friends in favor of the audit then started circulating a petition at the Gathering calling for the audit, which has created an expectation among some Friends that it will be budgeted for and completed. While this creates pressure, we are clear that it is Central Committee, who carries the knowledge and priorities of the entire organization while listening for the guidance of the Divine, that must discern how best to move forward.

Further, the decision to do an institutional audit must be made by Central Committee as it would require both currently unbudgeted funding and time from staff and volunteers across the organization. Even with the latest reductions in staff and programming, FGC is pressed financially. We’re also stretched thin, despite the generosity of so many of you who are reading this, in terms of staffing and volunteer resources. The result is that it is sometimes taking us longer to execute work than we had planned. Therefore, adding an institutional audit to the mix will further strain our existing resources. To say these things is not to argue for or against the audit. It is simply to acknowledge our situation so that as a body we can make informed decisions and have some sense of the possible outcomes.

With the above stated, we recognize the moral reasons for doing the audit. We also want to point out that the public desire to see us do the audit may mean that the additional resources we need to carry it out may be available. In fact, Ann Arbor Meeting has just committed \$1500 towards the audit to encourage us to commit to it. There may be other Friends who would come forward if we make a public appeal (being clear that Friends donations should be new money for this purpose on top of existing donations—we don’t want to divert funding from existing programs and potentially increase the pressure on our reserves).

¹ Wording is from a minute from Ann Arbor Friends received after the Gathering encouraging us to do the audit.

Certain staff and Central Committee members will soon be embarking on the process of learning more about what we could expect to gain from an institutional audit and what is required to complete such an audit (financial, staffing, etc.). We will also be testing if there is donor support for this activity. This information will be brought to the Committee for Nurturing Ministry, the Committee for Discernment Planning and Priorities, Executive Committee and finally to FGC's Central Committee which must enter into discernment concerning the benefits of this action and potentially approve the funding and resources to complete it. Given that we as a body have chosen, even in the midst of laying down other programs, to commit significant resources to anti-racism work, we imagine the possibility of an institutional audit will be something upon which we will all deeply discern.

We look forward to your thoughts and will be bringing more information forward as we have it.