

The Quarterly Meeting of Norfolk

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By ARTHUR J. EDDINGTON

AMONG the differences between the Quarterly Meeting in the eighteenth century and the present day the most important, perhaps, is the spirit manifested in the relationship between Norfolk Quarterly Meeting and its subordinate Meetings and the strictness of supervision exercised over them, both in its concern regarding any signs of slackness and in its readiness to afford encouragement and help when, through decreasing membership and other causes, weakness and difficulties appeared in any part of the County.

On various occasions from 1713 to 1770, concern is expressed when representatives fail to attend the Quarterly Meeting, and letters were sent to the Monthly Meetings, whose members had thus neglected their duty, requesting that steps might be taken to ensure that this should not happen in the future. The following minutes are typical of Quarterly Meeting procedure on this head.

4th mo. 1713. This Meeting finding Stoake Meeting to be remiss in their Duty, being ye sixth Quarter since any were here to Attend ye Service of ye Quarterly Meeting, have Order'd a Letter to be sent from this Meeting, to Stirr them up to their Duty.

7th mo. 1713. Notwithstanding that from ye last Quarterly Meeting a Letter was sent to Stoak Meeting to incite ye frds. to there duty, in attending this Quarter Meeting, Yet none have attended this Meeting; therefore this Meeting desires Michaell Williams to acquaint there Monthly Meeting therewith; in ordr. yt they may be prevaild upon, to the dischargeing of there sd. duty; and give an acctt. to ye next Qur. Meeting.

4th mo. 1714. This Meeting having Recalled over ye Meetings, and many Meetings Representatives being

awanting, this Meeting Adjourns untill ye 2d. hour this Afternoon precisely.

From time to time a subordinate Meeting would request the aid of Quarterly Meeting in their affairs, and a ready response was invariably accorded to such an appeal. In 1st month, 1738, for example, the Monthly Meeting of Hingham request assistance "to enable them to revive the good & Wholsome Discipline in their Church which the Rules of our Society do require", and eight Friends are appointed to attend their Monthly Meeting, who presented an encouraging report at the next Meeting, viz., "Edmd. Gurney reports that the Friends appointed to visitt the Mo. Meeting of Hingham at Wymondham did Visitt the said Meeting att the time & place appointed & found the Business of their Mo. Meeting much better done than they expected & that they hope the said Meeting will be able to do the Business of their Society in a regular & proper manner."

In 1751, visits were paid to the Monthly Meetings of Lynn and Wymondham, and the Friends appointed for this service report that they had "much Comfort & Satisfaction in their Visit". Two years later, a visit is paid to the Monthly Meetings of Tivitshall and Lynn, "to afford such assistance & advice, in a Spirit of Love and Meekness, as they in the Wisdom of Truth shall see needful".

In 1754, four Friends are appointed to visit Thetford particular Meeting as the members "do not join themselves in a proper manner to the Monthly Meeting of which they are a Branch". The report states that "there appeared a Disposition in the few Friends belonging thereto, properly to attend the Monthly Meeting of which they are members", and suggests that Wymondham Monthly Meeting might, at a convenient time, be adjourned to Thetford, so that the special difficulties of local Friends might receive full consideration. The isolated position of Thetford Friends received further attention in 1769, when a proposition was forwarded to Suffolk Quarterly Meeting that Thetford particular Meeting should form a part of Bury Monthly Meeting, but an answer was received that "many Difficulties appear incompatible to answer the good Intentions of the Friends of Norfolk; and this Meeting hopes they will be easy their proposal is not complied with".

A pathetic letter was received from Wells Monthly Meeting at the close of 1780, to the following effect :

To Friends & Brethren of Norwich Quarterly Meeting.

Dear Friends, From a weighty & sorrowful Consideration of the low declining State of our Meetings, and the fewness of our Members, which have nearly reduced us to an Incapacity of keeping up our Meetings for Business & Discipline, with that propriety, the Rules & good order of our Society require. It was unanimously agreed by those Members present, to lay this our weak State before you, hoping, that through the wisdom & guidance of Truth, you may be enabled to afford us such Help as may prove most conducive to answer the end of this our necessary Request.

With the Salutation of dear Love, we remain your Friends & Brethren.

Signed in our Monthly Meeting held at Wells 6th of 12th Mo. 1780.

Diatus Derry	John Secker	John Haycock
John Ransome	Joseph Haycock	Joshua Ransome.

It was not until twelve months had elapsed that an appointment of six well-concerned Friends was made to visit the Meeting at Wells, but their report which was presented to Quarterly Meeting in 3rd month 1782 contains features of unusual interest.

According to appointment of last Quarterly Meeting We attended the Monthly Meeting at Wells on the 6th of this Month, & have to report, that we found the Friends favourably disposed to receive our Visit ; They appeared to us to want Help, but we could not discover that the proposed Junction would afford it in the manner they expected ; though it is but right to allow, one great obstruction to the progress & Effect of Discipline amongst them, ariseth from the difficulty of procuring proper appointments for Visits to such as are partly separated from them by Offences, and placed yet more distinctly for want of Care, but who retain a claim to Membership, Love to Society, & seem to us to merit the continued labour of Friends.

We submit it to the solid consideration of the

Quarterly Meeting, how far it might be useful to appoint a few Friends to join them in occasional Visits to such.

Being informed at Wells that the Monthly Meeting at Lynn was adjourned to afford us the opportunity of a Visit, we attended it on the 8th of the present Month; It appeared to us that the Discipline of the Meeting was too much confined to the formal Record of it's Business, and that the Skirts of the Camp required more attention. We apprehended it our Duty to remind the Friends there, of their scattered Members, & recommended a Union in Labour, under that Influence which alone can preserve from Formality, & maintain the true Spirit of Discipline.

William Bleckly

William Crowe

Thos. Bland.

In the next meeting the Friends on this appointment, "with any other Friends who may be free", are to give whatever help they may feel right to the Monthly Meeting of Wells, with instructions to report to the Quarterly Meeting when occasion shall arise.

The sense of responsibility for the whole membership of the Quarterly Meeting is seen in the letters and minutes that were sent to the subordinate Meetings from time to time. A lengthy Epistle, dated 28th of 10th month 1720, dealing with good order in the Church, was sent to the Monthly Meetings "for them to communicate to their several particular Meetings, to be read in their generall Meetings". Eldership, Marriage, the frequenting of Taverns, and the Testimony against Tithes all receive attention, and there is a paragraph of encouragement and warning to Young Friends, in the course of which the more experienced Friends write: "It is a brave Thing to see the Young Generation thrive in the best Things, in order to which we tenderly Advice them, to keep the Principle of Truth in their own Bosoms."

In 1732, Friends deemed it necessary to send to Monthly Meetings a further warning regarding the slackness of some of the younger members, in the following words:

It having been observed that many of our young friends have of Late taken a Liberty of Conforming

in their language & behaviour to the Customary Salutation & Complements of the times which our friends as a people for wise & good reasons have always Cautioned & advised their members against, & this Meeting taking the same into their Consideration do Seriously admonish the members of our Society to watch over themselves & those under their Care in these respects, for it is our Judgment that the taking such liberties will Expose friends to greater Temptations & be a means of making them Loose that state of watchfulness & Selfdeniall, by which many of our Antients Experienced a being preserved from Joyning with a wicked & Corrupt Generation in such things as would have brought Dishonour to our profession & have wounded their souls.

In 1728, the Quarterly Meeting was seriously concerned at the negligence of Friends in their attendance of Weekday Meetings for Worship, and the following letter was sent down to Monthly Meetings to remind members of their duty in this respect.

Dear Friends, It having been our care at this as well as at our former Meetings to Inquire into the State and Condition of the Brethren who belong to the severall Monthly Meetings in this County in order to know what Spiritual growth and increase is amongst them and how they prosper in the things of God and his everlasting Truth.

And as in this our Inquiry we have to our Sorrow been informed of the great and almost general Decay of the publick Meetings for Worship on Weekdays, which have been long established in the several parts of this County, where Friends inhabitt. We do therefore take this opportunity in a Brotherly manner and in Bowells of tender Love to admonish and Exhort that for the time to come your care in this respect may encrease and our publick weekday meetings be more frequented than heretofore, for surely this Neglect can proceed from no other cause but a decay in your Love to God and an unconcernedness for your Spiritual Conditions.

Remember (we beseech you) the times that are past.

Consider how it was when the Lyon seemed to stand in the way, and outward dangers beset our Friends on every hand: Was not our publick Meetings for Worship (in those days) precious in the eyes of many: and the enjoyment of them more dear to them than the things of this world; Surely Friends it was: because they many times did witness the Lords goodness to be amongst them and were made to feed of that Divine and Heavenly bread which they hungred after, And to partake of that Living water which alone could Satisfie their thirsty Souls.

And altho' these outward dangers are Removed Yet we have a Spiritual warfare that we ought to be engaged in which will prove too mighty for us, without we keep close to our heavenly guide and to the discharge of those duties which are required of us.

Therefore let us again beseech you our Friends and Brethren whatever your Stations may be in the world, to give up your selves to this, and your other religious Duties and wheresoever your Weekday Meetings may have been laid aside, we desire they may be again established and Constantly frequented by you, and we hope and believe that the Lord who has many times been Witnessed in the Assemblies of his people, will appear amongst you and will give you to partake of his goodness to ye encouraging of you in the way you should go, and at last Conduct you to a State of Rest and peace with him forever which is the sincere desire of Your Friends and Brethren,

Signed by order and on behalf of the said Qurly.
Meeting

by Willm. Cay.

Two years later, in 1730, the report from the particular Meetings showed that in some places the weekday meetings were quite laid aside and in other places not so much frequented as could be desired. The Quarterly Meeting, therefore, directed that the Epistle of 1728 should "be again sent to the Severall Mo. Meetings for them to send to their Particular Meetings In order to have the same Read at the Close of their publick Meetings of Worship that it may have the greater Service amongst Friends".

In 1772, a question arose with regard to the best hour for holding Meetings for Worship, and it was decided to recommend that in all places where only one Meeting was held in the day it should commence at eleven o'clock: the following letter, prepared by Joseph Phipps, was accordingly forwarded to all the Monthly Meetings.

Dear Friends, The Supreme Lord & Lawgiver, from whom we receive our Being, and every spiritual & temporal Blessing, justly requires of us, the first-fruits & prime of our Hearts, and that we present ourselves a living Sacrifice, holy & acceptable to him. In order hereunto, it is our indispensable Duty to come as fresh & lively to our Worship as possible, and not to defer it to that unseasonable period, the Second Hour of the Day, when, after a forenoon's Activity, or Employ, & the indulgence of a Dinner, ease & heaviness naturally take place, and so overpower the minds of many, that instead of attentively waiting upon the great Minister of the Sanctuary, they sit in a State of Indolence; and too many fall into that shameful Situation of Slumbering & Sleeping.

As this hath long been matter of Concern to us, we take this Opportunity to remind you, that the holding your Meetings at a time of day so manifestly improper, necessarily renders them more dull, heavy, unserviceable, dissatisfactory & Disreputable than they might otherwise be. It also often prevents living Ministers, & helpful Members from giving you their Company; divers of whom have declared, that they have not freedom to attend Assemblies so ill-timed, with that frequency & cordiality they might do, were they held at a more suitable Hour.

The usual plea, of inconvenience to your selves, or your Affairs, can have no weight in opposition to a due performance of that solemn Worship required at your hands. We ought not to suffer Concerns of an Inferior Nature, to hinder us from discharging our religious Duty to the great Lord of Heaven & Earth, but in all things, to prefer his Will before our own, and his Acceptance, to our Convenience.

There can be no greater difficulties in the way of this Duty here than in other Counties, where an earlier

Hour is constantly observed, & the benefit of it acknowledged. A willing & truly concerned Mind, will consider, that such Sacrifices as cost us nothing, are nothing worth, and readily resign all self-gratifications, & customary Obstacles, to superior Duty. Let a due regard, therefore, to the publick Worship of our Almighty Creator, upon whom we depend for Life & Salvation, so impress your Minds, as to engage you to break thro' every real, or seeming difficulty; and to order your Affairs so, as in future to assemble cheerfully at an Hour not later than the Eleventh, when both your Minds & Bodies may be fitter for the solemnity of Divine Service; and undoubtedly your Meetings will be more lively, more acceptable to God, and more profitable to yourselves. We therefore recommend this necessary Alteration of the time of your Meetings to you, and remain with the Salutation of Love,

Your Friends & Brethren.

Signed in & on behalf of our Quarterly Meeting held in
Norwich the 30th of 9th Month 1772

By Isaac Jermyn—Clerk to the Meeting.

The effect of this letter was so pronounced that within a comparatively short time practically all the Meetings concerned had complied with the desire of the Quarterly Meeting.

A minute of 4th month 1732 contains features of special interest in regard to the younger members who were finding it their place to take part in the vocal ministry and questions relative to the granting of certificates when they desired to visit other Meetings.

Its earnestly recommended to the Monthly Meetings . . . that they be very Careful to Encourage the Sober & Well Inclined & to endeavour to make them usefull Members amongst them & where it pleases God to open the Mouths of any such wee Earnestly desire that they behave towards them with great Tenderness & if att any time they should think itt their place to Visitt the Brethren in other Countys, perhaps sooner than the said Mo. Meeting could desire, In such Case we entreat that all the advices may be of such a Nature as not to wound but if possible help forward

such Frds. in what is their Real Service, by which means we hope the Young may be helped & Strengthened & brought forward to the Service not only of ours but of all the Churches where their lott may be cast And Further this Meeting tenderly advices that Mo. Meetings be Very Cautious to whom they give Certificates to travell with, & that they do advise such to whom they give them that they do not stay Longer on their Visitts than they are of service, but return to their homes as soon as conveniently can.

It may be considered that undue stress has been laid on the divergences between the eighteenth century Quarterly Meetings and those of our own day, but it should be remembered that these are, naturally, of greater interest than the similarities, of which there are not a few. Many of these differences are due to the stage of development through which the Society was then passing, yet one cannot but feel that a wider vision and outlook are often seen in the matters that now engage the attention of Quarterly Meetings. In spite of this, it may be well to recall the powerful influence for good that a Quarterly Meeting can exercise upon its wide-spread membership, for the value of visits paid to the smaller Meetings and their members by Friends definitely appointed for this service by Quarterly Meeting does not appear to be so fully realized at the present time as it was in earlier days. It is, perhaps, permissible to hope that this concern may again arise in our Meetings, and to believe that if similar action were to be taken it might be the means of a fresh influx of spiritual life and power, both in our Meetings and amongst our individual members.

There is, finally, one fact of supreme importance that emerges from the records. For we find that in those days, as in ours, the spirit that underlies all the varied affairs which have to be transacted is a deep concern for the promotion of God's Kingdom on earth, a keen endeavour to learn and to follow His will, and an earnest desire that all the members of the body may experience the power and leading of Jesus Christ in their lives and be faithful in their witness to the Light.