

How We have Responded to Racism & Poverty, Within New England Yearly Meeting and more Widely

A Chronicle of
New England Yearly Meeting Actions
1965-2004

By Skip Schiel

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It is not enough to be generous, and give alms; the enlarged soul, the true philanthropist, is compelled by Christian principle to look beyond the bestowing of a scant pittance...to the duty of considering the causes and sources of poverty [and racism]. We must consider how much we have done toward causing it.

Lucretia Mott (1857)

I've written this chronicle to help us all better understand what YM has attempted to do about racial justice, to celebrate our efforts during the past 40 or so years, and to imagine and boldly make next steps.

1965—Gordon Brown, after representing New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM) at National Conference of Friends on Racism, held at Earlham College, introduced a concern that more African-American students be recruited for our Friends Schools (Minute 74). A committee was appointed to implement this.

...a concern that more Negro students be recruited for our Friends Schools. Three steps are needed: locating potential students, qualifying them for entrance, and raising money to pay their tuition...

Peace Committee and Social Concerns Committee, which had been separate entities, were combined.

1967—Minute 74 Committee formally established. Prime purpose was to raise funds to implement the concern "to meet the needs of more students from disadvantaged and minority groups." A \$20,000 grant from the Chase Fund initiated this. Funds to be administered through the Student Loan and Scholarship Committee.

We call on all individuals and meetings to examine their consciences and practices for subtle signs of discrimination and prejudice, for blindness in overlooking the degrading aspects of our present social patterns, and for weakness in failing to act on the leadings of the spirit.

Further, we would urge each Monthly Meeting to feel the necessity to become involved in an action program relating to the racial problem, thus experimentally showing what love can do.

—Worship-Workshop on Race Relations at YM sessions

1969—At Yearly Meeting, Erna Ballantine, Chairman of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, brought some observations on Friends and racism. "Friends think of themselves as persons of good will, but too often that good will comes across as patronizing. Friends too often talk of the good works they have done in the past instead of what they are going to do in the future in response to rapid change." Friends were shocked by this, and much discussion ensued.

The Missionary Committee urged Friends "to renew their ancient (over 100 years) concern for the Indians. Visits and work projects would be especially welcome."

1970—A Black militant group took over the platform at Philadelphia YM and demanded reparations. Daisy Newman was present. She returned to New England saying NEYM should be working for racial justice without waiting to be coerced.

Executive Council, during the year, had appointed a special committee "to consider the Yearly Meeting's responsibilities to Black people, Indians and the poor." This committee planned a panel discussion at YM, and there followed widespread seeking, discussion and sharing of insights (3 workshop sessions, 3 plenary sessions of the YM, a special session after adjournment of the day's business session, and frequent informal discussion)... "in the hope that some sense of God's will for us may come to NEYM." A workshop on Friends

Responsibilities for Blacks, Indians and Poor was named the Workshop on Friends Responsibilities for Victims of Prejudice and Poverty.

Minute 60 of that year's proceedings instructed the Peace and Social Concerns Committee (PSCC) to develop and carry out programs in local Meetings on racism. The special sub-committee of Executive Council was to be continued and asked to look for practicable projects to fulfill our responsibilities and to raise and administer funds in support of such projects. It was their "firm commitment to raise and expend \$100,000 over the next five years to be used in ways that will constructively relieve the hurt of prejudice and poverty." Sylvia Perry was clerk of the special committee.

The Minute 60 Committee became the Committee on Friends' Responsibilities for Victims of Prejudice and Poverty (CFRVPP).

1971—The PSCC asked to be released from its responsibilities for carrying out educational programs for the CFRVPP and that work be assumed by the latter committee itself. This was approved.

The new committee developed criteria for grant applications:

1. to "self-determination" groups where the people involved make their own decisions, providing their own creative leadership. 2. not provide operating expenses for a relief or service agency, but will seek to fund programs with new approaches to basic problems. 3. provide "seed money" where a small investment can attract further outside financing from foundations, banks, or government. 4. not to on-going local Meeting projects which have been underway for some years, except under special circumstances, but to new and imaginative programs. 5. keep a balance between northern and southern New England, also of Black people, the white poor, and Native Americans. 6. the project need not be Quaker-connected. 7. not to any organization which advocates the use of violence in carrying out its programs.

1972—A panel discussion one evening at YM urged Friends to avoid "the unwitting expectation that our attitudes and our background should prevail when we proffer help, and to be more aware of the rich hues of every culture." The Minute 60 Committee reported that its fundraising was well underway, and several worthwhile self-help projects had been assisted. It was made clear that funds raised by the Minute 74 Committee would count toward the \$100,000 goal. Grants, of necessity small, were to be considered as "seed money."

1974—The Committee on Friends Responsibilities for Victims of Prejudice and Poverty (Minute 60 Committee) was changed from a temporary 5 year sub-committee of Executive Council to a standing committee of the YM, and its title was changed to the simpler Committee on Prejudice and Poverty (CPP). The committee was congratulated for its creative work. Daisy Newman noted that a similar concern had been implemented by NEYM in 1775, and we might consider a celebration in 1975 of Friends' continuing attention to victims of poverty and prejudice.

The Freeman's Fund Subcommittee reports that several bequests over the last century have resulted in funds available "to aid in the education of colored people of or in the southern states."

1975—The \$100,000 goal was reached by CPP. PSCC developed Queries on Prejudice and sent them to all local Meetings, asking them to arrange discussion meetings and to report back. Only 7 Meetings responded.

What had been a concern felt and acted on YM-wide became the concern of a few Friends serving on the PSCC and CPP. Interest in corporate social action by the YM became limited to issuing public statements, requiring nothing of its members.

1979—The Minute 74 Committee held workshops at YM sessions and Moses Brown School about how Friends Schools can improve the environment for minority students in largely all-white student bodies. The schools had reported high rates of minority drop-outs and lack of role models for them among faculty and trustees.

1980—The name of the Minute 74 Committee was changed to the Committee on Minority Concerns to Friends Schools (MCFS), and the focus of their work changed from mere fund-raising to helping the schools remedy lacks that precluded fuller minority participation. The Committee hoped to fund a teacher-advisor to travel around to the schools to assist them to improve the situation. This did not work out, so instead the Committee decided to offer grants to individual teachers to develop innovative projects addressing racism.

1981—The Long Range Planning Committee of Executive Council asked George Watson to convene a joint meeting of all the YM witness committees to share problems and to see whether there could be more coordination between them.

1985—By this time, both the MCFS and CPP were benefiting from funds allotted to them from the YM Peace Tax Fund.

1986—A business session of the YM was devoted to reports from the five witness committees of the YM. (The Committee on Sufferings was included among the committees mentioned above.)

1987-89—Fundraising is limited to annual appeals, largely through New England Friends' notices, and acceptance of Peace Tax Fund disbursements.

On the Monthly Meeting level, education within the Society of Friends on concerns of poverty, prejudice, and racism is scant. Openness to new ways of dealing with these problems or CPP's work on them is not obvious by results of CPP efforts.

1990—Partly to re-energize CPP and to enable Meetings to become more aware and active on the concerns of CPP, Lisa Cox and Paul Hood offer to travel in their Quarterly Meeting.

1991—The two Friends are unable to accomplish visits because of the Persian Gulf War. Bob Philbrook agrees to travel in his Quarter.

CPP wonders how well it is responding to the charge of its founding minute, particularly the educational role. CPP begins thinking it can encourage more Monthly Meeting involvement in projects by adding this as a requirement to the grant-making guidelines. Much deliberation ensues; new criteria evolve, namely: direct involvement of monthly meeting in organizations applying for funds, seed money only, organization has few other sources of funding, involvement in all phases of project by those impacted by it, and empowerment of those benefited.

A rededication to helping Friends understand, accept, and deal with their own racism.

1992—At NEYM business sessions, MCFS is folded into CPP.

1993—CPP notices it has lots of money, mainly because it receives fewer applications, and only a few of them meet the new guidelines. The Committee pauses and experiences confusion.

1994—Major turmoil in the Committee, low energy, some discord about the wisdom of the guidelines, possible conflict of interest when those granting money are also part of the application process, and a felt need for clarification of direction. A special meeting is called at YM Sessions to sort through the problems, many respond. Monthly meeting involvement is relaxed to “as much participation as possible by monthly meeting in the organization applying for funds.” Applications start coming in, funds are granted.

1996—Growing vitality in the committee, and then...a waning of incoming money for the Contributory Fund. Several appeals are made to monthly meetings and individuals, individuals and meetings contribute about \$1,000 over fundraising expenses. To support anti-racism projects, CPP invites NEYM Friends schools to apply to its Minority Concerns Fund; none do. The Committee then decides to simply grant all its remaining MCF money (\$3,000) to the three NEYM schools for scholarship aid to students of color.

During 1994 to 1997 CPP organizes YM Sessions workshops on the history of Friends and Native Americans, speaking out against poverty, and undoing racism among Friends and in the wider society.

In NEYM, a period, perhaps cyclical, of looking inward, not so much outward. The fact of multiple Americas, defined by race and class and wealth, potentially explosive, needs to be brought more strongly to Friends—to increase awareness, to foster action.

1998-2002—a major shift in direction for the Committee on Prejudice and Poverty, in large part reflecting dwindling contributions to its Contributory Fund—from disbursing funds to educating Friends and monthly meetings. Educational topics include whiteness, white privilege, and religious bigotry, most often against Muslims and Arabs.

They strive to educate thru their semi yearly publication, *Freedom & Justice Crier* and offering workshops and educational materials to meetings and the yearly meeting. They stop their fund raising efforts.

On the New England yearly meeting level, the concern spreads. It is most vividly manifested by the formation of the Working Group on Racism, organized within the influential YM committee (or meeting for worship), Ministry & Counsel. Activists from other yearly meetings, notably New York, visit NEYM sessions to offer workshops on inclusivity and racial injustice.

NEYM sessions in 2002 features a dynamic presentation by the activist and educator, Andrea Avazian, who argues for making monthly meetings anti-racist.

2003-2004—some vacillation in direction, not completely deciding to shift completely from grant raising and disbursing to grant making (because of concerns raised by the Friends of Color group), difficulty in spending down contributory and minority concerns funds; regular production of the *Crier*; death of long time and highly influential member Robert Philbrook;

infusion of new people and new energy. A name change: Committee on Racial, Social and Economic Justice (reflecting a broadening outlook), CRSEJ (pronounced and remembered as "CR Sej"). And very important, the thought (with initial action) that maybe the committee and NEYM might divest of its Freedmen's Fund, thereby joining the growing Black reparations movement in a tangible manner.

The committee serves to educate New England Friends about issues of racial and economic exploitation, along with related concerns of prejudice (thought) and discrimination (behavior), because of--among others--disability, gender, sexual or religious orientation. We hope to help monthly meetings gain awareness and take action. We do this by organizing NEYM session workshops, providing books and other educational resources and sponsoring speakers and media, as well as helping plan YM session programs.

We publish two issues yearly of the Freedom & Justice Crier, detailing stories about racism, poverty, and various forms of intolerance. When invited, we visit monthly meetings to help in their efforts to learn about and act on issues of racial and economic justice.

In addition, we disburse money from several funds--Freedmen's Fund to students in historically black southern higher education centers who are preparing for careers in education, Contributory Fund to organizations addressing racial and economic justice, and the remnants of the Minority Concerns Fund to assist educational institutions provide services related to our main themes.

We work closely with the newly established Working Group on Racism, part of NEYM's Ministry & Counsel committee.

—Mission statement, 2004

For the section from 1965 to 1986, I have almost literally transcribed a document I found mysteriously; i.e., I've forgotten its source, maybe Jonathan Vogel-Borne, Field Secretary of NEYM. For the section from 1987 to 1991, I excerpted and slightly rephrased a report by Gene Boyington, former clerk of the Committee on Prejudice and Poverty. Gordon Browne and other Friends have advised me. I take full responsibility for the interpretation in this chronicle.

—Skip Schiel, first written in 1994, revised and updated in 1997, again in 2002, and most recently in January 2005