

By Bob Henry

I believe the Northwest Yearly Meeting is suffering from a *Pastor/Leader Centricity Complex*. This is where pastors, leaders, or groups of like-minded leaders in the yearly meeting have an obsession or excessive fear of “losing control” when their personal beliefs or understandings are threatened (in ways real or imagined) or even questioned by those who believe or think differently.

When the focus becomes too much on a certain leader or group of leaders it begins to create leader-defined factions who feel they can make decisions about who to include and exclude based on various motives (i.e. beliefs, morals, authors they read, people they associate with, etc...). If this seems very familiar, it is really no different than what we see happen in junior high with pre-teens and cliques.

Historically, Friends are clear that the distinction between laity and clergy is a false one and that all are *equal* before God. It harkens back to our core belief of “seeking that of God in everyone.” Thus, it seems alarming to me that many in the NWYM have focused on creating local and yearly meeting leadership with a great deal of power to define who is “in or out” while seemingly neglecting or acknowledging our Quaker distinctive of *equality*. And I am not just talking about those embracing our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers. I am also talking about fellow pastors, leaders, and entire local meetings who have been subjugated to this type of leadership and taught to draw lines, label, and refuse a variety of people a place at the table – and they claim it is all in the name of Jesus. At its extreme, *Pastor/Leader-Centricity Complex* often leads to “gnat-straining legalism” turning the average person off to what Friends offer and believe or at the least creating confusion.

Just recently my wife and I were approached by a retired woman who attends another local meeting within the NWYM. She said with anguish in her voice, “I can’t believe what is happening in the yearly meeting and what we are doing to our pastors.” In much the same way that the LGBTQ+ community feels dismissed or ignored from our presence, I believe many of the pastors who try to honestly and genuinely stand-up for living the Quaker way feel the same. Fellow pastors are being labeled, accused of being agenda driven, rejected for leadership, exploited for their differing beliefs, ignored and regretfully pitted against each other instead of seeking out the gifting and talents each brings. This happens way too often in groups that have become too comfortable and fearful of change.

I sense *Pastor/Leader Centricity Complex* in the NWYM comes from embracing too much of the pastor-driven leadership mentality of American Evangelicalism. Since I came into the NWYM almost 6 years ago, I have fought an uphill battle against pastor privileges and for acceptance to a degree that was damaging to my soul, my family and my ministry. And I have watched numerous other pastors suffer at the hands of leaders focused too much on power and privilege and not on the Gospel and Truth. When the pastor, leader or like-minded group, becomes the center of the equation and the proverbial “buck” stops with them, someone will suffer the consequence and the Quaker way is lost.

Sadly, I believe many of the pastors in our yearly meeting have suffered greatly (and will continue to suffer more than will ever be known) as pastoral care is replaced by rejection, estrangement and a set of hoops to jump through to prove oneself worthy of being called a pastor in the NWYM. Sadly, this often occurs at the hand of fellow pastors and leaders within the yearly meeting. It is already a hard club to break into without people working in opposition to one’s entrance. This is one of the many reasons I ultimately refused to take part in the NWYM Recording Process. I believe as Friends we are to be recognizing the gifting that God has bestowed on women and men alike, and recording what God is

showing us. Yet what I experienced was leaders trying to create more legalism to prove candidates worthy, or worse, producing scapegoats who would be singled out and blamed for the failings or lack of success of the organization.

This is what happens when we have a *Pastor/Leader Centricity Complex* – personal desires and needs get in the way of what God is actually doing in and around us. It blinds us to that of God in our neighbors, friends, and leaders. Sadly, this complex is very contagious. People like centrality – it boosts esteem, power, and the ability to control a situation (for the time being). Much like our first Quaker ancestors, cries will again be heard for a return to our roots because we have veered so far off our intended path.

I will be honest – Sue and I, along with our sons, became Quakers/Friends because we were drawn to its distinctives.

- We sought a people who embraced the universal presence of God in *all* people.
- We sought a people who desired building healthy communities that appreciated one another for the gifting God bestowed on them and their neighbors.
- We sought a people who did not fear the future, emerging wisdom, or people different than themselves.
- We sought a people who understood themselves and their actions in terms of the world's needs.
- We sought a people who were given permission to explore beyond their horizons with creativity and energy.
- We sought a people who were safe and would help us raise our children to love God and neighbor.
- We sought a people who were committed to the Quaker S.P.I.C.E.S. in daily life.

I am proud to say, that for the last several years I have begun to see this reality at the local level at Silverton Friends. I will be the first to say that it has not been easy. Silverton Friends went through a difficult identity crisis but is emerging as a people of hope and possibility, and continues to find and embrace the Quaker way in Silverton. As their pastor, I have had to combat the *Pastor/Leader Centricity Complex* that was among the people of Silverton when I arrived. Yet, I can honestly say the people whom my family sought are being manifest at Silverton Friends. Sure, it is *still* in process (and always will be), and yes, at times it has been messy – *really messy*, but the promising thing is that it is still evolving into what God wants it to be! God's not done with Silverton Friends yet! My family and I may be moving on, but it is *not* about us or me as the pastor. If it were, then I would be perpetuating the *Pastor/Leader Centricity Complex*. I have been a facilitator of the Quaker Way at Silverton Friends and will continue to be at Indianapolis First Friends.

My prayer is that the NWYM would embrace their heritage and return to listening, discerning, and being aware of God in others and in their midst. Instead of utilizing power moves or witch hunts to go after those that might challenge the powers that be, I pray that the NWYM would take time to embrace potential and possibility while committing to persistent learning and seeking Truth wherever it may be found. Most of all, I pray that each person in the NWYM would take a moment to appreciate those pastors, leaders and their families who have tried hard to listen to God's leading and remove themselves

from the center, without completely losing themselves in the process. They are humble women and men who have heavy hearts for the people of this world and deserve a BIG thanks.

My family and I have been blessed by many of you – the humble women and men in (or now formerly from) the NWYM which I just described. We have failed, learned, grown and matured. Yet with your help, guidance and friendship we have learned to thrive. We are glad to call you Friends and pray you will stay in contact with us. We will miss you, but will continue to hold you in the Light as you discern with our Present Teacher a way forward TOGETHER.

Grace and peace,

Bob Henry