

Rebuilding the Underground Railroad

A suggestion for unified action, advocacy, and identity among Friends in the USA, arising from the FWCC Conference on Friends' Peace Testimony held at Guilford College January 17-20, 2003

In the years around the Civil War, Friends in the United States became somewhat famous for their seminal participation in the Underground Railroad, the clandestine network of safe houses and other facilities that assisted escaping slaves to find freedom in the anti-slave North. Friends opened their homes to slaves on the run, hid and fed them until they could safely continue their journey, and at times provided them transportation and other assistance. Those Friends did not seek to end slavery by participating in the war's fighting, but neither did they stand helplessly by doing nothing. They risked themselves in order to invite and welcome people away from the enslaving causes and effects of injustice and violent conflict.

After attending the FWCC gathering at Guilford College in mid-January 2003, I traveled back to Indiana saddened that the weighty group who met there had been unable to arrive at a galvanizing message and call to action for Friends in the USA. It was clear that the evangelical, liberal, conservative, and other Friends who met in Greensboro agree that in faithfulness to the Gospel and our history, we should boldly advocate for nonviolence and oppose our government's intentions to use force in Iraq. That agreement did not, however, translate into an epistle or a definitive plan for collective action.

When the Greensboro FWCC group met for dinner at New Garden Friends Meeting on January 18, we were told that Levi Coffin's parents were buried just outside in the Meeting's cemetery. The dinner tables that evening were decorated with folded paper cranes, a Japanese symbol most people in the world now recognize as a witness against the use of nuclear weapons. I found myself wishing that Friends in our time could similarly come up with a simple symbol or idea that would instantly remind ourselves and onlookers of our identity and common call to peacemaking and progress towards shalom.

Perhaps the Coffins' Underground Railroad work could help us out. I suggest that we consider ways to challenge 21st century Friends to, in a sense, rebuild the Underground Railroad by becoming a faith community which, despite its diversity, works together to invite people away from the enslaving causes and effects of violence and war.

Much of the discussion at Greensboro focused on the enslaving fear, revenge, material excess, addiction to petroleum fuels, culture of accumulation and hoarding, and dependence on massive military expenditure which lie at the root of the USA's current policies and actions. Other speakers pointed out that American military action in Iraq will cause huge debts for future generations of Americans to repay, restricting their ability to do good in the world, and triggering new cycles of hatred and vengeance. Some also highlighted the enslavement of the Iraqi victims of both the UN's sanctions and Saddam Hussein's repressive regime over the past twelve years.

In John 8:31-36, in the context of an argument with Jewish teachers about the true meaning of enslavement and freedom, Jesus taught his disciples that those who obeyed his teaching and example would know truth, and that truth would make them free. Early Friends invited people to that truth and called it Gospel Order, a way of peace found only through submission to God's intentions for all people and things, not through managing to be more assertive than the next person or country.

I wonder if FWCC could call Friends to a 21st century rebuilding of the Underground Railroad, only this time above ground in full view of the watching world. Friends could be challenged to engage in shalom-building activity at the local Meeting, regional, national, and global levels, with a view towards making all our words and works an invitation to all people into Gospel Order, the truth that exposes enslavement and sets people free.

For Friends to seriously participate in such a common effort, they would need to examine their own consistency. Just as it would have done little good for Civil War Friends to welcome escaping slaves into homes where slaves were still owned and exploited, we will have a hard time inviting others to freedom if we ourselves are not in a healthy process of becoming free from the "seed causes" of injustice and violence.

Friends would also need to examine their effort's focus. Civil War Friends chose not to attempt to end slavery by going to the battlefield to kill the slaveholders. They instead welcomed slavery's victims, trusted God to stop tyrants in God's own way, and utilized whatever political avenues they had to work against the systems that tolerated tyranny. In the Good Samaritan parable that so intrigued people at the Greensboro gathering, Jesus has the loving neighbor treating the injured victim in the ditch. Nowhere does he suggest that his disciples should stabilize the patient, then go hunt down and physically punish the robbers.

Lastly, Friends will need to be challenged to take some risks for the Kingdom. Just as Civil War Friends lovingly and selflessly risked themselves and their fortunes in order to welcome strangers into their homes, Friends in our time will undoubtedly need to be called out of our areas of comfort to minister to strangers. We should be prepared to sacrifice individualism and privacy, to operate on a basis other than personal convenience, to share financial resources for the sake of love, and to show kindness and compassion to people who may never become part of our Meetings.

In the Underground Railroad, the Society of Friends in the mid-19th century had both a message and a method for tangibly expressing it that led to freedom for many people to become more of what God intended them to be. Friends' message is no less relevant to 21st century people enslaved by more subtle, sophisticated forms of bondage. What is needed are creative, courageous Friends ready to work together sacrificially to find 21st century expressions of the principles and testimonies that have enabled Quakers to work so effectively for the Kingdom of God for more than 350 years.