

Friends of Jesus Fellowship

By Stephen Angell, Mark Cannon, and Abigail Pratt-Harrington

Origins

From March 13 to 15, 2015, the Friends of Jesus Fellowship (FOJF) gathered for its Spring Retreat in a soggy Barnesville, Ohio, at the Friends Center, located in a house on the campus of Olney Friends School. It was filled to capacity with 25 participants, the official limit that the fire marshals would allow in the building. Three of those participants were visitors and researchers from the Earlham School of Religion: Stephen Angell, an ESR faculty member; Mark Cannon, an ESR student; and Abigail Pratt-Harrington, an ESR alumnus. Over the course of the weekend, Angell, Cannon, and Pratt-Harrington participated in the Friends of Jesus Fellowship retreat, but also, with the encouragement of the Fellowship, conducted two group interviews, one with the founders of the FOJF, another with active participants in the Fellowship who had joined sometime after its founding. This chapter is meant to summarize the results of these interviews.

The Friends of Jesus Fellowship has its roots in Young Adult Friends' Gatherings, including one that took place in Burlington, New Jersey, in 2007¹, another that took place in Richmond, Indiana, in 2008, and a third that took place in Wichita, Kansas, in 2010.² These had been preceded by a World Gathering of Young Friends, at which one FOJF member, Micah Bales, had been present.³ The Young Adult Friends who started the Friends of Jesus Fellowship were well aware that Quakerism as a religious movement was in large part a Young Adult movement when it began 350 years ago, and that several reform movements within the Religious Society of Friends in the three-and-a-half centuries since had been instigated by Young Adults.⁴

While the origins of the FOJF was among Young Adult Friends, and while it is still true that there is significant involvement in the Fellowship by young adults (usually defined as a maximum of 35 years of age), there was at the Spring 2015 Gathering a significant number of older adults. We don't have an age for the oldest participants, but it would appear that some of the participants were in their eighties, and there were also a significant number of participants sprinkled along the 35 to 80-year-old continuum. Some of the present or former members of the Workers Group are also older adults.

Three of the key organizers of the Friends of Jesus Fellowship – Micah Bales, Faith Kelley, and Tyler Hampton – met at the 2008 Richmond Gathering. According to Kelley, they “felt an affinity for each other in how God was calling them and what kind of work they were being called to. So they stayed in touch and did some travel ministry together over the next couple of years.”⁵ Hampton lived in Detroit, and Bales and Kelley, after being married after the manner of Friends in 2009, moved to Washington, D.C. One thing that Bales, Kelley and Hampton all had in common was a commitment to ministry in an urban environment. In their home cities, each began to start a new worship group. Each had previous experiences with one or more branches of the Religious Society of Friends, but none of the three fit in comfortably in any of those branches. The centrality of Barnesville, Ohio, home of Ohio Yearly Meeting, where both Kelley and Bales hold an affiliate membership, meant that it was a convenient meeting place early on, for Hampton coming from Detroit, and Bales and Kelley from Washington, D.C. At that point, the worship groups in D.C. and Detroit were not structurally connected, but in Kelley's words, “we felt spiritually connected.”

Kelley, Bales, and Hampton would meet in Barnesville twice a year, even when it did not seem to go anywhere beyond the simple fact of meeting. But in 2012, “we had an experience

where things seemed to click and we felt like a community.” In that year, the group in D.C. went from being an opportunity for worship or fellowship to feeling like a congregation. The gatherings in Barnesville felt increasingly spiritually powerful, so the twice-yearly meetings continued. It was shortly after the 2012 meeting that the group settled on the name of “Friends of Jesus Fellowship.”

Around that time, they also came up with an efficient and flexible structure. Bales envisioned the Fellowship as “an apostolic band like Paul’s inner circle, who were charged with going around the churches and making sure that everyone was okay, and making sure that the gospel was preserved and spread.” (One question that we still have, but don’t have the answer to, is how the Workers Group is chosen.) The workers are the people who engage in a covenant to care for the whole Friends of Jesus network. They have a membership commitment document, a set of promises that the entire community was able to agree on.⁶ That document follows in its entirety:

“Together, we experience Jesus as our Savior and Healer, Lord and Teacher.

“As we grow in our relationship with Jesus, we seek the power of the Holy Spirit to turn us away from sin, brokenness and incompleteness, and to bring us into more abundant life.

“We commit ourselves to:

- Love one another as Christ has first loved us
- Live a deeply rooted life through Spirit-led worship, prayer and other disciplines
- Participate fully in a base group and larger gatherings, creating a community of trust and transformation where all can experience the love and power of Jesus Christ

- Be taught by the Holy Spirit: directly, through the Bible, and through each other, allowing the spiritual gifts of each individual to be fully used for God’s glory
- Be accountable to each other in love, compassion and forgiveness, following Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18
- Offer the resources at our disposal to our common life and mission: time, money, energy and love
- Proactively invite others into our base groups, larger gatherings and wider ministries – sharing Christ’s good news as broadly as we can
- Make God’s love visible by working for the coming Kingdom: for peace, mercy, economic justice and reconciliation.”

From this early period, the group developed “Advices and Queries,” a common way for Quakers to express the foundational aspects of their faith and practice. In Bales’ words, the advices and queries “served to outline the basic doctrinal DNA of our faith.”⁷

Early on, the Friends of Jesus Fellowship experienced conflict. As Adria Gulizia said, “there were people who were involved [in 2012 and 2013] who are no longer, so not everything has been smooth.” The group needed “a functional, God-honoring way of handling conflict.” They found out that simple denial, or, in Gulizia’s words, “pretending that [conflict] wasn’t there until it threatened to tear our community apart”, was not a workable strategy. A positive outcome was that the group realized that it needed to specify in more detail how its structure works. So they came up with a reconciliation document, informed by their Bible study and seasoned with prayer. The documents pertaining to structure were generated by the Workers, as the “apostolic band” has come to be known, a somewhat different process from the Advices and Queries and membership commitments, which were developed and approved by the local Detroit and D.C. communities and then approved by the Friends of Jesus Fellowship as a whole.

While the Friends of Jesus Fellowship has existing congregations in Detroit and Washington, D.C., a developing group in Philadelphia, and dreams of starting congregations in other locations, their on-line presence has become a major part of their ministry. The Friends of Jesus Fellowship has a Facebook page. It had a Google Plus group at one point. One of their members, Micah Bales, blogs with great consistency and eloquence.⁸ People can participate, either by coming to a congregation meeting in D.C., Detroit, or Philadelphia, or to a twice-annual spring gathering, or by reading Bales' posts and commenting on-line. Kelley comments that the Friends of Jesus Fellowship is a "porous" entity, in that there are many different entry points and modes of involvement, and those most centrally involved have relaxed to the extent that they don't try to specify how interested parties should relate to the group. Kelley states that the Workers no longer worry that "Oh, we've got to figure out for sure, are you in or out, what is your role, are you doing the things you are supposed to be doing?" There is now a great deal of latitude for interested persons to engage a web-friendly Friends of Jesus Fellowship in whatever way feels most comfortable to them.

Purpose

Faith Kelley points out that it began from the desire for a home. The Detroit worship group had sought membership with Ohio Yearly Meeting and had been turned away, perhaps because while the Detroit and D.C. groups shared a Christ-centered spiritual basis with OYM, both groups were LGBT-affirming, whereas Ohio Yearly Meeting (as a whole) was not. Kelley and Bales were already members of Ohio Yearly Meeting (and still are), but they are clear that the reason that the DC group did not pursue even close ties with OYM was their difference of opinion over the faithfulness of gay and lesbian people. "It took us a while to figure that out,"

Kelley reflected. “A couple of years of banging our heads against the wall.” According to Hampton, these differences over whether to affirm LGBT persons became a “stumbling block” in any formal affiliation of these groups with Ohio Yearly Meeting.

FOJF Friends had the opposite problem when they approached liberal Friends for spiritual care. There, their eagerness to affirm LGBT Friends was not a problem, but, at least for the liberal Detroit Meeting, the Christ-centered theology of the Friends of Jesus became a “stumbling block,” as Detroit Meeting turned down a proposal to give the FOJF spiritual care for that reason.

The initial organizers felt so “lonely and weird.” Kelley characterized the group response as follows: “If there is not an existing home for us, we should build it in an entrepreneurial sense. If no one can give it to us, we’ll figure it out ourselves.” Furthermore, it was evident that if such a ground-breaking endeavor was to succeed, that no one group could do it alone, so they would need mutual support.

The name, Friends of Jesus, was significant in itself. Gulizia recalled that Bales “suggested that we be friends with Jesus so that there would be no mistake about whose friends we are.” The founders thought that the name was fitting, and they wanted to be explicit to avoid the “huge risk of doctrinal creep. If you want to be able to invite in as many people as you want, you have to make sure that people are clear what they are being invited into.”

Agreeing on a mission statement took longer than the membership document. Eventually, in August 2013, the FOJF did agree on a statement of “Our Mission and Vision”:

Mission:

Friends of Jesus is a loving community that listens and responds to Jesus as we experience him in our hearts and in our midst. We equip one another to discover and use our spiritual gifts; learn to follow Jesus in our daily lives; and live as peacemakers, agents of God's justice and reconciliation.

Vision:

We are a network of small groups united in becoming:

- o A deeply rooted spiritual family, where each person can experience the living power of Christ within and make positive use of their spiritual gifts.
- o A community that wrestles together with Scripture and its meaning for our lives. We make space for shared listening to the Holy Spirit, where anyone may be inspired to speak.
- o A gathered people, participating in Christ's work as a multi-ethnic, socioeconomically diverse, LGBTQ-affirming community.
- o A seedbed for ministries that make visible Jesus' jubilee kingdom through acts of mercy, prophetic witness and teaching.
- o A movement that equips people to gather new small groups, congregations and churches throughout the DC metro area and beyond.⁹

Bales summed up the vision of the FOJF as follows: "I see the mission of the Friends of Jesus Fellowship as nurturing an expression of Christ's Church that is preaching and living the complete gospel and building up a body in a sustainable way that glorifies God." Gulizia says that the Friends of Jesus Fellowship is "all about discipleship to Jesus, all about living the gospel, all about spreading the gospel."

Kelley states, "It's easy to point toward LGBTQ stuff as the tinder box issues, but in reality, the primary question for FOJF is not how the leadings of the Spirit fit into the Quaker tradition." For many Friends, conservative and liberal, Quaker tradition has become the gospel, and "we struggle to interact in communities where the ultimate authority is the tradition."

When the goal is radical discipleship, it is helpful to have everybody committed to that goal. Gulizia, a member of St. Louis Meeting, a liberal meeting, “realized this past summer that even before you get within shouting distance with Jesus, if you would have just said in my meeting, we’re all here to build the kingdom of God, right? You might get 35% of people who are down with that as a mission. That’s not enough to be an effective community. It’s not enough if people are stuck there.” Bales points out that “the very idea of what it means to be the people of God in 21st century America is deeply in flux. I’m not sure anyone actually knows what that means anymore, and I don’t think we do either.”

Members of the FOJF are clear that part of radical discipleship is working hard for meaningful social change, with imagination and creativity, and offering great inspiration to others. A couple of examples will suffice. As part of their 2014 internship with the Detroit Group, Tyler Heston and Hye Sung Francis Gehring spent a significant amount of time working with at-risk LGBTQ youth. From the fall of 2011 onwards, Micah Bales spent significant time working with and building up the Occupy D.C. Movement. In 2012, he wrote, “The Occupy movement has played a vital role in awakening the prophetic imagination of my generation.”¹⁰

In a 2015 Quakerspeak video, Bales reflected on his experience in the Occupy Movement, relating it to significant strands of apocalyptic witness in the Old and New Testaments:

One of the coolest actions that we took part in as a part of the Occupy DC and Occupy Church was to take ... a paper mache golden calf, and we marched it up Capitol Hill to the Capitol Building where Congress meets and we delivered it to them. In the book of Revelation, the city of Babylon is a code word for the city of

Rome, which was the capital of the greatest empire the world had ever known . . . It talks about the city of Babylon (that is the city of Rome) being on fire and the smoke rising up to heaven. . . . Somehow – and I don't think this was planned from the beginning – the Occupy movement unlocked a real need that we had, not to list demands, not to say what needs to come next, but instead to say, “Look at this burning city of Babylon. Look at the smoke rising up to heaven. Look at the utter destruction of this city.” And we're living in it.¹¹

Worship

Worship is very important to the FOJF. Hampton points out, “It's an essential part of who we are.” The Friends of Jesus Fellowship is very interested in experimenting with various forms of worship. Hampton allows that there are limits to that experimentation: “Most of us would probably shy away from the conception of evangelism that involves megaphones.” But FOJF Friends believe that people really can be healed by a relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. Furthermore, they believe that “we should do our best to embody that, to share that.” The weekend included plenty of opportunities for waiting, expectant worship after the manner of the Religious Society of Friends. Christian songs from the Taize Community and from the Vineyard Fellowship accompanied worship that weekend.

This conviction was very evident to any observer of the Barnesville weekend. The FOJF has what may be described as charismatic leadings. When persons present need healing prayer, or prayers of protection, the act of prayer will often be accompanied by laying on of hands to the person in whom the need has been manifested. There is also much emphasis on spiritual gifts. In

fact, the March 2015 gathering was largely devoted to exploring the spiritual gifts of each participant in the gathering.

On at least one occasion during the weekend, there were Friends present who spoke in tongues. There was no interpretation offered of the prayer given in tongues, but the prayers appeared to be a translation (or interpretation) into an unknown tongue of a prayer being offered by another participant in English.

Leadership

The leadership of the Friends of Jesus Fellowship is provided by the Workers Group. According to Bales, the Workers are “like stewards of the Gospel,” a conception drawing from the writings of the Apostle Paul.¹² Four of the Workers live in the D.C. area, and two in Detroit. However, some members who are not currently members of the Workers Group are also providing leadership. In Detroit, the husband (Ian) of one of the Workers (Michelle Williamson) is currently serving as Clerk of the Detroit Friends of Jesus Fellowship.

FOJF recognizes distinctions in leadership in that some are leaders on a national level, some on a local level, and some on both levels. Adria Gulizia is part of the National Worker’s Group, but there is no local group currently in which she could participate (due to geography), so her leadership is at the national level. Others are starting groups locally but currently are not workers at a national level.

The leaders have authority over faith and practice, but it is emphasized that they do not exercise authority alone, but in community. Micah Bales sees that as a distinguishing factor between Friends of Jesus Fellowship and many other groups of Friends: “We are pretty

comfortable naming leadership and saying that these leaders act typically as a community, not just one person ideally, but as a community, and that these people have authority, and these people can say yes or no. That's part of the reason that it's safe to be a really open and inclusive community, because we can let in all sorts of interesting folks, even folks who totally disagree with our philosophy, but, at the end of the day, they don't have veto power over the community's identity."

The leadership of FOJF are all volunteers. None are paid for their work. Micah Bales is a released Friend who is supported by donations to help to release him to do work under the care of the D.C. Metro Area Friends of Jesus Fellowship. But, as Kelley says, "we are very clear that Micah is not our employee." Bales adds, "I think I receive a stipend that's probably within the range of many small town Quaker pastors in Indiana," a stipend that he would describe as "a tip of the hat."

The work of the Workers Group is seasonal, so it is difficult to quantify the number of hours that Workers put into the work of the FOJF. They work very hard in the days and weeks preceding their semi-annual Gatherings, for example. But there are also many weeks during the year when a primary time commitment as a member of the Workers Group is a biweekly conference call, that averages an-hour-and-a-half in duration. In addition to that, Adria Gulizia estimates that she probably spends "two hours a week either talking with people who are already connected with Friends of Jesus or reaching out to people in the hope of getting them invested and on board with the Friends of Jesus." Again, this work is most intense in the weeks leading up to a Gathering.

Bales' online ministry is time intensive, and although it may not be under the care of the Friends of Jesus Fellowship, he would characterize it as "alongside the Friends of Jesus Fellowship." Despite the prominence that comes to Bales because of his blogging, the FOJF is (according to Gulizia) "very clear internally that this is not the Micah Bales' show." Bales admits that "early on, it was pretty much the Micah Bales Show supported by Tyler Hampton with special guest Tyler Hampton." However, he was aware of that tendency, and he did not want to perpetuate that pattern, so, for a while, he tended to hold himself back in conversations. Sometimes, this reticence was helpful, and at other times, not so much. "But there came a tipping point," at which time Bales realized that "This is a real group, not just people I have assembled." At that time he became "more forceful" in his leadership, because he knew that they would readily push back. Bales obviously enjoyed that turn of events.

Composition of Membership

The twice-annual national Gatherings of the Friends of Jesus Fellowship met from 2012 to the Spring of 2015 at Barnesville, Ohio. The FOJF Workers have considered that they have outgrown the modest-sized house that constitutes the Ohio Yearly Meeting Friends Center, and thus they do not anticipate returning there. The Fall 2015 Gathering, on Labor Day Weekend, will be held at a church camp in northern New Jersey.

According to Bales, the participants at these gatherings are diverse. Sometimes they come from a variety of Quaker backgrounds, sometimes from a non-Quaker background. He notes that the Gatherings are beginning to draw from individuals whose previous religious experience has been mostly in the charismatic tradition. But, in any case, whether the religious background is primarily Quaker or primarily non-Quaker, the participants come to FOJF with some degree of

discomfort with their previous religious affiliations. So part of what is going on at the Gatherings is that “we are overlapping in our journeys as we try to figure out what Quakerism means to us, and as they enter into Quakerism, they are struggling to find a place in it.”

While Bales did not elaborate on the point during this group interview, he has wondered aloud on his blog whether Christ-centered, social-justice-oriented Quaker communities, largely bereft of support from other Quakers, need to engage in “collaboration with other, more robust and mission-oriented communities beyond the Quaker fold. . . . I’m not willing to allow Quaker brand loyalty to get in the way of faithfulness.”¹³ This elicited a substantial comment thread, including a testimonial from Mike Huber, a successful Quaker church planter in the Pacific Northwest: “I don’t think being a Quaker is a liability. In fact, when it comes to planting a church, I think we Quakers have some important advantages. When we gather for worship, we expect everyone to listen for the Inward Teacher. When we make decisions, we expect everyone to share in the work of discerning God’s guidance. Our structure is non-hierarchical. I think these expectations are enormously helpful in guiding people toward real discipleship.” In response, Bales clarified that his concerns were not ones having to do with Quaker identity, but rather ones of lack of spiritual or institutional infrastructure support. For aspiring Quaker church planters in the D.C. Metro area, “it’s not clear where or how to plug in.”¹⁴

Some coming out of the Quaker movement have become more interested in charismatic practices. This has been an important part of the experimentation concerning worship, that has been one of the central purposes of FOJF. Kelley and Bales note that, in the Saturday night session of the Fall 2014 Gathering, FOJF had a time of prayer, in which some of the vocal expressions were in tongues. FOJF had anticipated the participation by a New York Quaker

couple who were known for speaking in tongues. That couple had been prevented from attending at the last moment, but then the tongues speaking happened anyway. Bales states, “that was the first time that it was at any of our gatherings where it was public expressed. . . . It was a new thing for that particular form of worship to emerge last fall, but it was also not surprising to me.”

Coming from an evangelical Friends background, Kelley may have been more surprised. She noted, “My parents went through the experience of having their negative interactions with Pentecostals, where they felt like Pentecostals were trying to take over all these evangelical Friends’ churches.” The tension to which Kelley refers between Evangelical Friends and the Pentecostal and Charismatic strands of Christianity is a longstanding reality, one that reaches back to the origins of the modern-day Pentecostal movement in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁵ But, for FOJF Friends, these negative patterns from the past were no matter for concern. Gulizia says, “I don’t feel a Pentecostal takeover in the works.” But she adds that the speaking in tongues evidenced at the previous fall’s gathering “felt very natural, but I did find it kind of surprising. I did feel very strongly that there was going to be a Holy Spirit explosion, but I didn’t know how it was going to happen. I don’t think I was really expecting it that way.” Michelle Williamson observes that FOJF is not a group that is “prone to theatrics,” but one that is very “Spirit covered.” So Friends appreciate that if something unexpected happens, “it is from God.”

The worship style at the national twice-annual gathering is different from the local worship. Hampton says that “our worship and our style in Detroit tends to be a much quieter and more reflective experience.” Williamson adds that “it’s much more informal, because there’s typically about three of us. So we go from Bible discussion to worship,” and because they have

been worshipping together for so long, vocal ministry may be unnecessary because they know each other so well. The energy of the people at the Spring Gathering, however, “makes you feel more rowdy in the Spirit.”

Bales reflected that the attenders at the Spring Gathering are more “hard core” and are able to hold their own in a dynamic worship process with much experimentation. The same does not hold true, however, for the worshippers in the local D.C. group. Bales would describe the latter group as “fragile” in the newness of their relationship, and under those circumstances, it is best not to proceed too quickly to experimentation in worship styles.

Advertising

Micah Bales’ blog is obviously a major way that spiritual seekers find out about the Friends of Jesus Fellowship.

Other methods of spreading the word of the FOJF have been tried. The D.C. Group tried a Google AdWords campaign, but that was completely unsuccessful. Bales reflects, “We had a person in our community at that time that had a little bit more money than the rest of us, and he said, ‘Let’s splurge 600 bucks over the course of the summer to try out Google AdWords.’ We tried it, and for 600 bucks we got one inquiry by email that did not follow up.”

Gulizia states that the most effective way for her to spread the word has been to tap personal networks. She finds this to be complementary to FOJF’s web presence. “When people make inquiries to the website, they often come to me and I get back to them. Generally, nothing happens, but every so often it does. I have a friend in Philly – we’ve never actually met face-to-face – but he was my apprentice when we were doing the Google groups. We talk every few

weeks. He is very sympathetic to the Friends of Jesus Fellowship, which is why he is willing to be my apprentice.” Bales agrees with Gulizia’s observations here. He also has found that personal connections have generated the most success, and that these connections have happened both face-to-face and online.

For Gulizia’s Philadelphia friend and others in the northeastern United States, holding the coming Fall Gathering in the New York metropolitan area will be a large plus, because it will make it easier for the many inquirers in that area to come. She reports that two of the participants in the Spring 2015 Gathering, Jim and Stella, reflected that their interest in the FOJF came from a positive connection with Bales at the Northeastern Christ-centered Friends Gathering. But, in fact, active involvement in FOJF comes from a multiple series of contacts. In the case of Jim and Stella, Gulizia had known them and talked to them prior to their meeting Micah Bales.

Ways to communicate the great positive benefits, but also to deal with the complexity, of Christ-centered Friends transitioning away from traditional Friends Meetings occupies Gulizia’s thoughts. She notes that the transition to active involvement with FOJF can be a major step, but also a lifegiving one: “I’m spending a lot of time thinking, how do you talk to people and get them to seriously engage with the question of whether their current commitments are life-giving. Is this really what God wants you to be? We have a lot of emotional attachment to our meetings, even when we understand that they are dead and dying. So how do you get people to stop being the clerk of six committees, and to start out with this kind of entrepreneurial endeavor?” When a newcomer becomes fully committed to FOJF, they of course bring with them their own network of Friends, and thus they also can contribute to multiplication of fruitful contacts with serious inquirers.

Bales attended the Gay Christian Network Conference in Portland, Oregon, in January, 2015. He says, “I was really surprised how many people came through” with whom he had good conversations. Making a large number of contacts on the West Coast, however, was of limited usefulness, because at present FOJF doesn’t have much of a presence on the West Coast. But the positive response that Bales received at this conference alerted him to the value of these events, and he can easily envisage going to more such conferences in the future.

Local Friends Meetings have been of some assistance to FOJF. When the DC Group was founded, Bales and Kelley were living at a D.C. Quaker-affiliated nonprofit organization, the William Penn House.¹⁶ The William Penn House allowed the D.C. Friends of Jesus to use their space for free, a large benefit. Other Quaker meetings in the area made much more modest contributions; for example, they would sometimes put their announcements in their bulletins. Perhaps these other Quaker meetings, at some level, wanted to be helpful, but were handicapped by never quite understanding what FOJF was, or lacking the interest to find out. Bales joked that other Quakers in the Washington, D.C., area “would occasionally run into someone who was a little weird and say, ‘Maybe you would prefer the Friends of Jesus.’” These kinds of modest assistance and good-will gestures extended to some individual Quakers and Quaker meetings outside the D.C. area. Adria Gulizia got some assistance from the Young Adult Field Secretary of New York Yearly Meeting, for example.

It was also noted that publicity could be double-edged, that groups like FOJF could develop both positive and negative reputations. Kelley mentioned that the negative reputation of FOJF was that “we have really high standards. We expect a lot of people.” Still, there is no getting around that word-of-mouth through other Quaker and Christian communities has been the most fruitful strategy for the FOJF to get better known.

Some of the interest in FOJF has come from places where there are not active local groups at present. Micah Bales has been invited to “talk up Friends of Jesus” at the Winchester Friends Meeting in Winchester, Indiana, and the Berkeley Friends Church in Berkeley, California. It is not a coincidence that pastors from both churches are on Bales’ board of advisors (and in fact were present at the 2015 Spring Gathering).

Profiles of Later Participants

It was also possible to assess the results of FOJF outreach through a group interview with five participants in the 2013 Spring Gathering who had not been a part of the Fellowship from the beginning, but who had joined at a later point. Two of these interviewees, Bill Samuel of the D.C. Metro Area is now part of the Workers Group; Hoot Williams is a former member of the Workers Group and is now just a local leader. Three others, Hye Sung Francis Gehring, Tyler Heston, and Yelena Tower, had become interested in the Friends of Jesus Fellowship quite recently and were not so centrally involved in its operation. Gehring, Heston, and Tower had all become aware of the existence of the Friends of Jesus Fellowship through Micah Bales’ blog. Samuel and Williams had longstanding personal contacts with Bales and other members of the group.

These participants had a diverse and rich group of church involvements before becoming involved with FOJF. Samuel had experience with Quakers since his youth, although more recently he has attended the Church of the Savior and a non-denominational church; Williams and Tower are more recently convinced Friends. Gehring and Heston, who are a gay couple, currently attend a Disciples of Christ Church in Memphis, Tennessee. However, they see the Disciples of Christ Church as a short-term home for them, and see the FOJF as their home base.

Once Gehring and Heston found out about FOJF, they threw themselves into it, even spending several months as interns with the Detroit Group in 2014.

When asked why they considered themselves a part of the FOJF, the Christ-centered nature of the group was mentioned by all. Gehring and Heston also were attracted to the FOJF, because it is gay-affirming. While all mentioned the commitment to Jesus Christ as important, they also appreciated the innovation and spirit of play in the fellowship. Samuel was appreciative that FOJF keeps “innovating our worship, just seeing where the Lord leads us. Some of the best things at the Gathering have not been planned.” Heston appreciated the “attentiveness to the Spirit, without being lost in the clouds and exorcism.” He also liked the social justice commitment of FOJF. Tower appreciated the intimate, house church flavor of the Fellowship, along with its gay affirming, social-justice-oriented community. Gehring liked that there was a lot of play.

This account of FOJF members accord well with the insight of Diana Butler Bass that any new religious awakening in the United States will include humor and play:

Sometimes movements of change bog down, because those involved become so serious about the work that they forget about the basic human need for fun, delight, and joy. Awakening cannot occur without laughter and lightness. Mirth is essential to vibrant spirituality. Making a difference in the world, worshipping God, embracing new friends, feasting together, celebrating small successes, doing meaningful work – these are all things that make people happy.¹⁷

When asked to reflect on their former worship communities, these participants tended to highlight one or more of the following elements, the theology, social justice orientation, and

community aspects of FOJF, as missing in their former churches. Heston gave a typical response for the group. He had participated in Charismatic Christian worship, and appreciated their idea that faith is what you do with your whole life, not just on Sunday, but criticized them for getting lost in the clouds a lot. He had participated in a Disciples of Christ church, and commended their welcoming stance toward gays, but observed that they didn't feel like a community. Only the FOJF had all of these desirable elements of a faith community.

Meeting Space

All of the local groups are currently meeting in homes. FJOF's Spring and Fall Gatherings until Spring 2015, were in Barnesville, Ohio, but the fellowship will be meeting at Camp Lebanon in New Jersey next time, so that they will have more space. By having the retreat over the Labor Day weekend, they will also be able to have a longer retreat.

Kelley says that meeting at homes "works for where we are right now. We just kind of roll with it." For one thing, it is free. FOJF has not paid for meeting space, except for its Spring and Fall Gatherings. They plan to keep meeting in homes "until God tells us otherwise."

In terms of envisioning the space, it is also helpful to envision the kind of activities that comprise the local community time together. In the case of the D.C. Group, which gathers on Sunday evenings, Bales reports, "it's not primarily meeting for worship. We gather and have a meal, then have bible study and maybe some prayer and hang out. We're trying to introduce other activities, for example, lately the group has sung some prayers before Bible study. Mostly, though, it is dinner and bible study with folks in our neighborhood. In previous years, we had different worship events, sometimes meeting on a weekly basis in a congregational setup. But

Faith and I got really burned out because of the load we were carrying, and it got really old to put on an event for people every week. So we stopped doing that.”

Funds

Micah Bales’ ministry has funds, which come from donors both inside and outside of FOJF. The Gatherings are self-supporting, with the money from participants covering the Gathering’s expenses. Both the D.C. and the Detroit Groups have bank accounts. One source of funds is an automatic money deduction from the paychecks of members. Many contributions are in-kind. Among the 2015 Spring Gathering participants who have not been around since the founding but have discovered the group more recently, there was a diversity of participation in the FOJF’s fundraising. Some are regular contributors, and others donate more sporadically.

Overall Assessment

Bales says, “It feels like we are in a good place right now. We had a few bumpy years of inaction and then pain, frankly. For a minute there, we weren’t really sure if we were going to survive. You could say we were tested.”

Some of the problems stemmed from interpersonal conflict. But that also came from lacking structure. According to Williamson, “that pointed us in the direction that we needed to go. Once we created that structure, we experienced more solidity. And the people who were not really on board with the direction we were going in, departed. There is a harmony among us now that we are all pretty much on the same page as far as what we feel like our current mission is and what we are about.”

The Friends of Jesus are well aware that there is a transformation of the Christian churches in North America going on at this moment. FOJF intends to model radical discipleship and radical inclusion. When it comes to considering the degree of success with which their efforts have been met, FOJF Workers draw a distinction between their web presence and the local communities they have painstakingly nurtured. The results of planting local meetings have been very different from their expectations. Bales says, “In terms of our wired network, things are going swimmingly. But in terms of our local community in D.C., I think our local community sees us as pretty tenuous, and weak, and questionable whether it will make it. . . . Planting a church is really hard. I used to read all this literature about church planting and evangelism, and I stopped reading it. They made it sound like if you just get out there and have a good attitude, it will magically happen. Bullshit.” The Detroit Group has had similar experiences. Williamson reports, “Tyler and I have struggled for years. I was like ‘Oh, we’ve got some people coming. Wait, no one’s coming any more. Oh, this person’s coming, and I’m really excited. Wait, that person left.’ We had to determine what is life giving for us in this. For us, it looks less like worship, it looks more like service.” Hampton adds that in the contemporary context, “people are just noncommittal about everything.”

For Bales, this leads to more hard questions. He is still not sure what to do on a local level. The D.C. Fellowship “doesn’t resemble a congregation at this point, and I personally feel unchurched.” Kelley adds that part of the difficulty is the very nature of the flux that the North American churches find themselves in at this moment. “The old ways aren’t working, and the new ways haven’t developed yet.” When pressed for a long-term vision, FOJF Workers profess to have none. Bales says that he would have had a lot more to say about his vision for the group a few years ago.

Bales doesn't see their current situation as total failure. There is much good energy and enthusiasm, especially in the wired network. He does find the mixed signals to be "weird." And Gulizia, who does not currently have any local group, remains optimistic that her networking will bear fruit. All it takes is a few households to come together, she points out.

It is possible that the FOJF will undergo further geographical expansion. Gulizia is optimistic about the possibility of starting a youth group in the New York metropolitan area. At various times, FOJF workers have dreamed of expanding their Fellowship to the West Coast, or to Europe. They have no illusions of the amount of work that will be involved. They know now that this kind of expansion is hard.

Their observations accord fairly well with the insight of Diana Butler Bass and William McLoughlin on the nature of the "Fourth Great Awakening" that Americans may be in the middle of right now. That Awakening, Bass and McLoughlin assert, may "result in a more experiential, pluralistic, holistic, environmentally focused and communal sort of American religion and politics."¹⁸ But, if as they also assert, there is no way to return to the old ways, and the new ways aren't yet clear, that means that existing churches and churchpersons may well find themselves in the midst of confusion, even chaos. But confusion and chaos do not have the last word, especially with the Friends of Jesus Fellowship. They are modeling a new form of Christianity. It has a strong community aspect, reminiscent perhaps of the house churches that were a part of first-century Christianity. They nurture a strong social justice orientation. They are LGBT friendly. They are innovative and experiential in their worship practices, and open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in all areas of their lives. And they don't hide their light under a bushel. Their witness is available, through a few clicks of a computer mouse, to anyone connected to the Internet. They remain confident that their message is just the one to reach

Christians dissatisfied with their current churches, or the unchurched not currently involved with any religious entity. Perhaps the Fourth Great Awakening will bend in their direction. In their persistent, faithful, loving outreach, they may yet speak to countless hearts and souls.

Endnotes

¹ “A Powerful Gathering of Young Adult Friends in Burlington, New Jersey” Monday, Feb. 19, 2007, <http://lambswar.blogspot.com/2007/02/powerful-gathering-of-young-adult.html> (accessed May 5, 2015)

² “Epistle – YAF Gathering 2010,” <https://yaf2010.wordpress.com/> (accessed May 5, 2015); “A Brief History of Young Adult Friends in North America,” <https://yaf2010.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/yaf-2010-yaf-history.pdf> (May 5, 2015).

³ Micah Bales, “Should Quakers Be Laying On Hands?,” Nov. 29, 2012 <http://www.micahbales.com/2012/page/4/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

⁴ “A Brief History of Young Adult Friends in North America,” (May 5, 2015); Max L. Carter and Simon Best, “Quakers, Youth, and Young Adults,” in Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion, *The Oxford handbook of Quaker studies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 458

⁵ Except as otherwise indicated, all quotations are from the interviews conducted by Stephen Angell, Mark Cannon, and Abigail Pratt-Harrington at the Friends of Jesus Fellowship Spring Gathering in Barnesville, Ohio, March 13 through 15, 2015.

⁶ “The Friends of Jesus Commitments”, approved March 4, 2013, <http://www.friendsofjesusfellowship.org/friends-of-jesus-commitments/> (accessed May 5, 2015)

⁷ <http://www.friendsofjesusfellowship.org/advice-and-queries/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

⁸ “Micah Bales: Religion is Easy. Discipleship Is Hard” <http://www.micahbales.com/> (accessed May 5, 2015)

⁹ <http://dcmetro.friendsofjesusfellowship.org/mission-and-vision/> (accessed May 5, 2015)

¹⁰ Bales, “Remembering Occupy D.C. – and Taking the Next Step”, Oct. 1, 2012 <http://www.micahbales.com/2012/page/9/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

¹¹ <http://www.micahbales.com/tag/occupychurch/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

¹² 1 Cor 4:1-2; Tit 1:7; see also 1 Pet 4:10.

¹³ Micah Bales, “Are Quakers Capable of Planting Churches,” March 30, 2015, <http://www.micahbales.com/quakers-capable-planting-churches/> (accessed May 5, 2015)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Thomas D. Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800-1907* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 169-172; idem., *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 83-84.

¹⁶ <http://williampennhouse.org/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

¹⁷ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after religion: the end of church and the beginning of a new spiritual awakening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), p. 260.

¹⁸ Bass, *Christianity after religion*, p. 224.