

It is a good thing for us to gather, at the time of AFSC's centennial, to celebrate the remarkable leaders who have brought both gifts of the Spirit, and their own diverse talents, to the AFSC over these one hundred years. I have been privileged to know every General Secretary except Clarence Pickett and Vincent Nicholson. I have seen that providing leadership to the AFSC is not easy. As we look back over time, we can see that each clerk and each General Secretary has had to struggle fiercely with the issues of the moment – issues external to the AFSC generated by a disordered world much in need of healing; issues internal to the AFSC advanced by staff, committee members and local Friends, all eager to agitate. A spirit of candor elicits the fleeting thought that I might have caused some of the leadership's headaches myself. Yet these leaders persevered, and the AFSC accomplishments they enabled are astonishing.

I think it is fitting, before ending this evening, to recognize the acute paradox involved in providing leadership within the Quaker tradition, with its firmly egalitarian practices and its concept of that of God in everyone. Each and every Friend and fellow-traveler in the AFSC has his or her own Inner Light, and each is strongly inclined to follow the Divine Leadings they are given. While I would not want to accuse the Holy Spirit of inconsistency, the truth is that trying to provide leadership to so many people, all with their own divine leadings, is a little like wrestling with God.

But there is scriptural precedent for the challenge to which our AFSC leaders are called. We remember the story of Jacob, who on the way to war with his twin brother Esau, met an angel, a messenger of God, and wrestled with the angel all night long, never giving in. Finally, the angel paid tribute to Jacob, blessing him and changing his name and that of his progeny from Jacob to Israel. Jacob, now called Israel, said "I have seen God face-to-face and lived." He proceeded to make peace with his brother Esau, and there was started a cultural and spiritual movement which has influenced civilizations through the millennia ever since.

I know that those of us privileged to serve the AFSC in leadership roles have indeed wrestled with many messengers of God, and through our AFSC service we too have seen God face-to-face. And I am confident that the AFSC is destined to continue to be a beacon of hope, of peace, of justice, and of truth for the world of the future, summoning diverse people everywhere to the realization that raw human nature, which seems so often to be noisy, self-centered and dangerous, can also be so excellent as to make visible divine purposes. Indeed, this realization allows hope that together we can build a world which mirrors divine life and grace, a world which we can truly call our home.

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