

Report from the NYYM Outreach Working Group (OWG) Spring Sessions, 2017

It was a year ago, at Spring Sessions, that the Outreach Working Group (OWG) began to take form. In response to a rising interest in Quaker Outreach within NYYM and to the temporary suspension of the Advancement Committee, the General Secretary invited us (Robin Whitely and Arlene Johnson) to become co-conveners of an as-yet-undefined Outreach Working Group, reporting to Ministry Coordinating Committee, to advance and nourish the growing interest in outreach that was expressed in the Statement of Leadings and Priorities approved by the Yearly Meeting in 2014.

Initially, the task was to devise a structure and process that could gather and grow the energy for outreach as it existed around New York Yearly Meeting. Thank you to all of you – Friends and NYYM staff – who assisted in clarifying that structure. Through several months of discernment and talking with many of you, it appeared that it was important initially to focus on nourishing the energy for outreach coming from monthly meetings. We needed a structure for sharing information, getting new ideas, encouraging each other, learning outreach skills and methods--- and, just as important, very gently holding each other accountable for moving ahead with outreach efforts.

The structure that emerged consists of two bodies, each of which is facilitated by us as co-conveners: (1) The first is a Steering Circle that provides perspective, advice and counsel on direction, process and goals of the OWG within the context of NYYM and Quaker practice. The members of the Steering Circle are Jeffrey Aaron, Melinda Wenner Bradley, Bob Frick and Miranda von Salis. (2) The second group is the Outreach Practitioners' Circle made up of representatives of monthly meetings who answered an invitation to pursue more effective outreach. Last fall every monthly meeting was invited to join the Practitioners' Circle by committing to participate in bi-monthly conference calls and to take some action—whether large or small—to promote Quaker outreach. We expected that perhaps five or six meetings would accept this invitation and accountability, but *nearly one-third of monthly meetings responded with interest*. Eventually fifteen monthly meetings became part of the Outreach Practitioners' Circle and are currently on the OPC list¹

At this point, six months into the process, we have had four conference call meetings with the Outreach Practitioners' Circle. Each ninety-minute call has had a topic, agenda, advance reading and often a “homework assignment.” Each of these calls has been rich --- rich in spirit, in the content shared, in the ideas that emerged, and in a growing sense of energy and potential for Quaker outreach. (We should also say that the immediacy of the calls has been aided by use of NYYM's Zoom video conference account and the ability to see each other as we conference.) Our sense is that the spirit is indeed moving among us to create a community of practice. Though we have not met in person, we are becoming a virtual community of monthly meetings who share a deep commitment to outreach and, who, through sharing and listening and working together, are expanding our outreach and learning to make it more effective. To quote one OPC member, “I am getting a lot of good suggestions for activities and a lot of inspiration to keep doing them. It helps to know there is a larger community out there working on the same issues.”

For our conference calls we have been blessed to have guest resource people such as Emily Provance

¹ The following monthly meetings are at present on the the Outreach Practitioners' Circle (OPC) list: Albany, Binghamton, Buffalo, Chatham Summit, Conscience Bay, Easton, Flushing, Mohawk Valley, Manasquan, New Brunswick, Old Chatham, Rahway-Plainfield, Saratoga, Scarsdale, and Wilton.

and Melinda Wenner Bradley; we have drawn upon existing resources from FGC; and we have started to create our own outreach resources that will eventually be available on the NYYM website. It would be impossible to share fully all that is happening within the OPC or within the participating monthly meetings, so we'll take the approach of sharing just a few of our key learnings to date.

Effective outreach needs to be a Quaker practice. We are discovering that, to be effective, outreach cannot be just an initiative, program, or special event. It must be a *practice* that is nourished and motivated by spirit, that is an *ongoing part of the life of the meeting*, linked to all committee work and grounded in the historic tradition of sharing the good news. We are working toward understanding what that outreach looks like when it is an ongoing, fundamental practice with a monthly meeting.

Greeting is not the same as Welcoming. We have been exploring the difference between *greeting* visitors and truly *welcoming* them. It turns out that welcoming has many dimensions, both spoken and unspoken, starting with the signage out front and extending to what is on our websites and how we follow up with inquirers. In fact, we started developing a checklist of multiple good ideas and best practices for welcoming newcomers; that checklist has now grown to *five pages!* (It will soon be on the NYYM website if you'd like to check it out.) It also turns out that becoming a truly welcoming meeting may be **the most important first step in outreach**. Research shows that feeling connected and feeling that “I could fit in here” is the major determinant in whether people return to our meetings.

It is worthwhile to consider what is Good, Better and Best in Quaker Outreach. On one hand there is a “just do it” aspect of outreach. Doing something is almost always better than doing nothing. But, as we are learning, most outreach we do could be improved – by understanding our strengths as meetings, by being more conscious of the welcoming process, by being more intentional in crafting our messages, and by enlarging our knowledge of the options and approaches for outreach. For example, we've spent time thinking how we describe ourselves and how we respond to the question “What is a Quaker?” The result is a short paper on “Discovering and Shaping Your Own Quaker Kernel” and a role play process for practicing our own responses to that question. This, too, will shortly be available on the NYYM website.

IN SUMMARY

The first year of work for the Outreach Working Group has been filled with the joy of discernment, discovery, learning and an emerging, spirit-filled community of practice. We personally feel gratitude for being part of that process.

The OWG was, from the outset, a two-year program, designed to have a sunset and re-evaluation in June, 2018. So, as OWG enters its second year we are thinking about how to build on our work so far and whether there should be any changes in how we operate in the next twelve months. We will be seeking the advice of MCC and our Steering Circle and also invite and welcome ideas from all Friends.

It seems clear to us that the spirit is moving to inspire outreach. It is important that, together, we find the structures and process to keep these leadings alive in order to continually improve our messages and welcome. As we grow toward an understanding of how outreach fits within fundamental Quaker practice we are also helping to ensure that the Quaker message remains alive, speaking with power to the condition of those who seek to know it.