

NYYM State of Society Report 2016-2017

Comparative Snapshot

	2015-2016	2016-2017
# of Reports Received from Meetings	62	60
# of Reports Received from Committees	22	4
Most Frequently Reported Themes (# reports mentioning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of Witness activities (27) • Aging community (23) • Small size (19) • Loss (18) • Rich/powerful worship (17) • Increase in advancement/outreach (16) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worldly political challenges/election (31) • Importance of Witness activities (24) • Small size (23) • New attenders (21) • Rich/powerful worship (18) • Shortage of people to serve (17)
Prevalent Themes Not Prevalent in Following or Preceding Year (# reports mentioning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging community (23) • Increases in out-of-meeting activities/gatherings (15) • Loss (18) • Prevalence of workshops and retreats (13) • Lack of vocal ministry (10) • Desire to deepen spiritual relationships (10) <p style="text-align: center;"><i>These themes were not prevalent in '16-'17</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worldly political challenges/election (31) • New attenders (21) • Deep, abiding love for each other (15) • Importance of welcoming people (13) • New members (12) • Confronting racism (10) <p style="text-align: center;"><i>These themes were not prevalent in '15-'16</i></p>

2016-2017 Narrative

All quotations are pulled directly from State of Meeting reports unless otherwise noted

In this past year, Friends across New York Yearly Meeting have experienced joy and grief, hope and despair, growth, stagnation, and loss. We have felt the pain of division and the wonder of unity. We have found strength and comfort in silence. We have found power in our collective and not-so-silent cries for justice. We have illuminated the infinite love of God and found great openings. We have also encountered deep oceans of darkness and impiety. Sometimes these oceans distract, overwhelm, or completely engulf us. We are grateful for the elders, communities, f/Friends, and Spirit that remind us of and ground us in the Light. In unusual times, we are learning to be brave in addition to being faithful.

November's elections and the current political climate are on our minds and have profoundly shaped the present state of our religious society. However, even though over 60% of Meetings made mention of politics (the words election, politics, president, government, and Trump came up 40 times in 60 reports), this is not what defines us. Joy, gratitude, hope, Faith, trust, love, community, and justice, each had more mentions unto themselves than all comments related to worldly political challenges. These words came up 450 times—a powerful lesson in perspective. The news and our social media accounts do not define the state of New York Yearly Meeting or our monthly meetings. We may grieve for our divided nation and some may be de-stabilized by the pain and anguish around us, but we continue to witness to others in Love, to hold space for the pain of the world. We refuse to surrender to our fears or to be lost in our concerns, and we understand that this moment in history provides opportunity to share the Truth. It is also a moment for us to consider what it truly means to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. We know and trust that God is with us. We are listening.

In a statement circulated in November, our General Secretary prompted each of us to consider what and in what we trust. This year's state of the meeting reports confirm that our trust is abundant. So too are there opportunities for growing our faith.

We trust in our worship and practice as Friends. 37% of Meetings expressed that they feel worship is deep, grounded, and alive (28% last year). Silence is powerful. Messages are gifts. Many of us continue to seek ways to deepen the quality of ministry and some of us are searching for deeper experiences in worship. To this end, we are working to expand the quality of our listening, recognizing that when we allow Spirit to speak to us (or through us), we connect to each other and all of creation, entering a healing and loving communion, creating sacred space.

We don't always trust that Spirit is at the core of Meeting practices. We seek divine guidance on how to balance urgency for witness and activism with faithful Quaker process, discernment, and spiritual nurture. We recognize that it is difficult to practice the testimonies without getting too vocal about the political, and we find ourselves having some difficulty distinguishing between making political statements and giving messages from Spirit. We strive to protect the discipline of expectant waiting and to lift our commitment to deep listening and respect for all, even those with whom we disagree. One Meeting admits, "We usually treat one another respectfully, but we are, we confess, not fully clear of sniping and eye-rolling." We attempt to lay our egos and individual opinions aside to make way for Love, understanding, and Truth.

We don't always trust that our traditions fit. We trust in continuing revelation. Many of our Meetings are in a state of transition and are rethinking traditions and practices that may no longer be relevant or helpful in creating the Beloved Community. We are reconsidering committee structures, membership processes, individual responsibilities, the role of clerks and trustees, and the frequency and form of meetings for worship with a concern for business. In June 2016, young adults from around the world gathered for quite-possibly-the first-ever Quaker Party, and in 2017, our Young Adult Field Secretaries started QuED Days (Quaker Exploration and Discourse). This series, originally designed as an opportunity to share personal testimonies and connect across generations, met that purpose while simultaneously blossoming into an outreach opportunity, with live-streamed talks being viewed around the world by Quakers and non-Quakers alike. We are experimenting with social media, hashtags, memes, podcasts, blogs, and virtual meeting structures. Some of us are not comfortable with such changes and are worried about straying too far from what we are used to. Others of us feel that such envisioning is necessary to surviving in an increasingly transient and diverse twenty-first century. We will continue to listen for divine guidance.

We trust in our community and love for each other. In all of our quirks and limitations, we are strong in our love for each other and are grateful for the living Holy Spirit among us. 28% of reports mention deep, abiding love amongst members and 35% call out the strength of the Meeting community (22% last year). We foster love and unity by caring for each other, by asking for ourselves and others to be held in the Light, by making ourselves available in tender and loving ways. We strive to create safe and brave spaces for Friends to explore, experiment with, and live out their Faith and practice. We are grateful for the activities and opportunities for fellowship that connect us, for the myriad ways that we work and play together. A member at one of our meetings puts it this way: "When I think of the Meeting as an organization with committee structures and concerns to address, I feel overwhelmed and feel that we are lacking in membership, resources, and skills. When I think of the Meeting as a family, sharing life, facing loss, addressing challenges, celebrating love, and building support and trust, I feel deeply grateful and see this whole thing as a miracle."

We trust in our children. Children around the Yearly Meeting expressed gratitude for pillow fights, bagels, singing, George Fox Lego books, lighting candles, and having fun. One child said that Meeting was as good as a playdate and another shared, "there is something different every week...Sitting in silence can be kind of long and boring. The adults are sitting and listening for God. We are sitting and waiting." Some children shared that we (Quakers) could learn to respect and listen better. We could also have more fun.

With the help of our new ("ish") Children and Youth Field Secretary, we are growing in our willingness and capacity to support, engage, and include our children in the life of our Meetings. This year, at least eight Meetings intentionally involved children in the writing of their State of Meeting reports, and this remarkable effort unto itself demonstrates that

we are getting better at integrating young people into our worship, soliciting their ideas, involving them in business, and teaching them about Quakerism. Six monthly meetings in New York and New England Yearly Meetings are also engaged with the Partnership Project, a three-year project designed to help meetings explore new ways of nurturing multigenerational community. Across our Yearly Meeting, we are beginning to focus on creating regular, reliable, and authentic environments and activities that meet the needs of our children rather than merely finding things for them to do “in the meantime.” We are learning how to take their words and wisdom seriously and we are stronger for it.

We trust in our growth. As a Yearly Meeting, we are growing in numbers and in faith. While 42% of Meetings mentioned being small, 42% reported increased attenders this year (15% last year) and 25% reported that their membership has grown (10% last year). New attenders and members are giving us new hope that our Meetings will continue to spread God’s love into the next generation. We are grateful for new substance, strength, and joy and seem to feel that we have a greater capacity to connect and to give. We are a tenacious group “traveling with the movement of the Spirit, which has its own direction and one we seem willing to share and contribute to, no matter our numbers.” Perhaps as a result of this optimistic perspective, we feel that our presence is slowly becoming discovered.

We don’t always trust that people will come or stay. Many of us are laboring with diminishing numbers and uncertainty. We feel broken when people leave. We feel helpless when we put effort into planning and few people come. We wonder why people who hold our Meetings dear do not attend worship regularly. We wonder why people come for a while and then stop with no explanation. We wonder how to best engage people who come from time-to-time. We wonder how to welcome people and how to provide hospitality, support, and information without being overwhelming. At least 15% of us feel that this has been an area of growth over the last year and the new Outreach Working Group is helping us explore how to better receive and engage new attenders and seekers. There is hope.

We trust in our commitment to confront injustice. We know that change begins with us, and we work to improve the human condition and support social justice issues both locally and at a distance. More than half of us mentioned Witness activities as central to our Meetings’ activities (44% last year). At least 50% of our Meetings sent representatives to the White Privilege Conference, 20% mentioned a commitment to confronting racism (4% last year), and Friends Center for Racial Justice was born. Across the Yearly Meeting we share a commitment to defend the most vulnerable among us, and we lead and support reform efforts related to immigration, refugee policies, police brutality, religious persecution, prison conditions, gun violence, healthcare, housing, and the environment. We recognize the importance of supporting the rising ministries and leadings of individuals within our Meetings who are actively engaged in or led to pursue social justice work. We are also sometimes hungry for more discernment around communal ministries and leadings and wonder how we are collectively led to act. We are grateful for the activists and champions among us.

We trust in diversity. Our actions do not always align with this trust. We do not all believe the same things or use the same language, but our mutual intention as seekers draws us in and holds us together in gathered community. 20% of us expressed gratitude for the range of spiritual beliefs in our Meetings. Others feel we would benefit from more diversity across political and cultural lines. We know that we are strengthened by our identities, individuality, diversity of experiences, and differences in perceptions. “Though we may sometimes be judgmental of one another’s actions and ministries, we remind ourselves that each is given the Divine Light through different eyes and that each walks in different places on the journey... We know that patience, acceptance, compassion and forgiveness, each arise in Love.” At the same time, tend to surround ourselves with, extend welcome to, and even nominate and hire like-minded, like-looking, and like-behaving Friends. Often these tendencies are inadvertent, and other times we are guilty of deliberate exclusion, omission, or disregard. In either case, it is painful and we are challenged to be better.

We trust in our communities. Our Meetings cherish and acknowledge their place within their neighborhoods and communities. 25% of us list outreach and sharing “the good news” as a commitment (22% last year). Almost 15% of us mentioned sharing Meetinghouse space with other faith and community groups. We have polished our websites and newsletters, hung welcome banners in multiple languages, participated in interfaith gatherings and local events, and hosted our own events to further engage our communities. We are looking for and finding new opportunities for visibility and know that sharing our Truth is important, especially in hard times.

We don't always trust that we know what to do. Answers to challenging questions sometimes evade us and have in some cases been evading us for years. We seek divine guidance to lead us when we feel in the dark about a response or when we are unsure of how to make a decision that speaks to all the members of our communities. Sometimes we question our understanding of Quaker process. Other times we do not know how to move forward because there is so much going on and we lack the tools or capacity to find unity. We attempt to see these moments of uncertainty as fertile opportunities to connect with new roots before bringing responses to the light. A prayer was offered at our March Meeting for Discernment: "Dear God, we are listening. Many of us are already faithfully doing all that we can imagine. Help us to open up to what you might do that is beyond what we can imagine. Amen." We try to be patient and trust that way will open.

We don't always trust that we are going to survive or that there is enough time, energy, money, or people. 28% of Meetings are concerned about not having enough people to do the work (8% last year) and it is frustrating when we desire to do more than what our small membership and limited resources allow. Our Meetings are busy, full of busy people, and many members feel stretched thin. Many of us feel the burden of maintaining meetinghouses, supporting young families, and remaining both politically and faithfully active. At least five of our Meetings worry about their future and long-term viability. Yet, one Meeting expresses that the "lack of available, skilled hands has allowed soul searching about the real, fundamental meaning of the Meeting and what we are really called to do." We wonder if perhaps the workers are few so that we may better hear what we are supposed to do. Friends call us to be committed to the same faithfulness as long as we are here.

We trust in our history. We are proud of our Quaker heritage even as we are aware of past faults, missteps, and complicity in injustices. We celebrate and remember those who came before us and the people we have lost. We feel that they are present in our hearts, in our worship, and sometimes even within our Meetinghouse walls. We remind ourselves that we are "not only a summation of our past but a continuation of our responsibility as spiritual human beings." Though perhaps revealed in new or more frightening ways, many of our challenges (both worldly and otherworldly) have been experienced before. This year, Adirondack Meeting celebrates its 250th birthday. We will survive.

In 2017, New York Yearly Meeting Friends seek to be brave, to continue putting God at the center even when we are fearful or discouraged. We seek to build bridges between ourselves and our communities, and we seek to reimagine what we know and what we think we know. We seek to take advantage of the opportunities we are being given, even if these opportunities arise out of darkness. We seek to claim, name, and share the Truth as we experience it. And at the same time that we reach out, we seek to reach in. For we trust that "when we are aligned with God, our resources of abilities and gifts are multiplied by many times." We trust in the Divine Source of Love. This trust is unshakeable.