

State of Society Report 2018

The 2018 collection of annual State of Meeting reports is a gift infused with wonder and wisdom shared from around the Yearly Meeting. The forty two reports submitted this year vary widely, from the way information was gathered and threshed to the style and format of the final documents. This year's committee of two was a wee bit late out of the starting gate with the annual guidance document and yet the responses from meetings, prison worship groups and their members are collectively Spirit-filled with ideas to challenge and uplift us all.

Six meetings reported being bigger this year; enriched with new and more diverse membership, "we are thriving" and "the buoyancy of youth brings optimism for our future"; others are smaller, older having lost long-time members, finding the need to reduce committee work and struggling financially. Most reports describe one way or another the love and appreciation for the sustained rhythm of worship, meaningful relationship with children and families, community projects and concerns, shared readings, advocacy and outreach, caring for one another, and shared time together. One report states, "Love gathers us up. We hope to continue growing in ways we may not even know," another celebrates "the quality and collegiality of our Meeting," and, another that "Spiritual nourishment is strong and steady!" One notes "[we] remain small and intimate, expressing the fundamentals of searching for the truth, centering down and focusing on the inner light;" a second reports "we feel the power of transforming love in our worship" while describing that there are differences in the words used by those who speak to express that experience.

In another report a meeting celebrated the value of "our strengths – our worship, our witness, and our desire to improve our relationships." One prison worship group explains "understanding situations and comments from different perspectives helps us find that which is the good and true in whatever comes our way ... being honest with God first and having that honesty carry on to others." A member of one meeting asked the meeting to hold a conference to focus on the query "What would it take to achieve a world where every human could lead a decent and dignified life?" Some reports are shorter - one wrote: "In the spirit of Simplicity and Integrity, this report doesn't need to be long, just say what we want it to say." This year's shortest and simplest reads:

"The snow melts
and is washed away
by clear cold streams.
And we are still here."

The average length is a page or two; some longer with more reflection on both the process and time spent together creating the report as well as the results. One meeting conducted a survey

to gather individual input, another held a Community Worship session using a query about three of the testimonies, a third asked committees to think about the testimonies as it was reflected in their work across the year (this was the longest of the reports –nearly four pages!)

Many reports describe trying new approaches to sustaining and enriching the meeting - new ideas for worship, outreach activities, social gatherings and other practices; illustrating the life of the Spirit within the meeting and the wider community. These include: a welcome flag, a Seeker's corner in the meetinghouse; "third day" evening worship time; using queries from Britain and New York Yearly to start worship; a contemplative singing group; a monthly meeting to engage in civil discourse over public issues; a "Quaker Activism" group that meets periodically to determine projects to make the Quaker "message" more visible in the community; hosting a monthly multi-faith racial justice gathering and a "What Canst Thou Say" spiritual journey sharing group.

One meeting used "listening posts" during which participants gather in small groups to listen intentionally and deeply to what is on our hearts and minds" and "vision together what kind of meeting we want to be." One smaller meeting mails monthly devotionals to members, they stay in touch with one another by phone and hold a monthly conference call for healing prayer and worship; another meeting has established a regular schedule of online worship with a growing fellowship; another holds once a month Community Worship; and another established a worship group in Spanish for area farm workers. In one meeting the December holiday season included a play written by a member and a cookie-decorating day organized by one family. Two meetings, nearby to one another, share responsibility for hosting worship on campus at a local college every two weeks. Another meeting stressed the importance of providing childcare for all events, paid as needed. One meeting schedules worship with a concern for business every other month; an alternate idea that is "working well" for a smaller meeting is to restructure to a "committee of the whole" for all but two committees – Ministry and Counsel and Buildings and Grounds. A third meeting shared the value and meaningful use of a restorative process in support of a concern affecting the meeting.

Throughout the reports are rich and varied ways to describe how the Quaker testimonies anchor aspects of community practice and form the basis for individual members' witness or ministry. One meeting wrote that the testimonies "give us a well to draw from, reminding us to be simple people, peaceful people, and people of integrity;" another declares "our testimonies are the waters that sustain us; our meeting is the vessel that holds them," and others that "community is a verb" and "living the Testimonies is being who we are – seekers who try to know and live what is true." One recognized that "our collective worship plays an important part in fueling individual activism" and described the unique ways their individual members felt supported in their leadings.

Meetings wrestled with the discussion of the testimonies - "meeting for worship helps us approach the source that gives rise to our testimonies" at the same time that "we struggle to live out the testimonies in a world that doesn't share our values." "Testimonies must be tested and lived into not simply professed." "We are reminded that the testimonies are the outward

expression of an inward transformation. We feel cautious about framing testimonies as a credo, a checklist of goals or qualities to be adhered to, rather than as fruits of the Spirit.” One meeting began their report by stating “This has been a year of deep reflection and inward work for our Meeting” as we “continue to move closer to our Quaker roots,” and are “seeking consistent community-wide messaging that reflects our inward journey and testimonies.”

Simplicity and care of the earth are evident in descriptions of how both meetings and individual members choose sustainable stewardship for their buildings and properties and work on behalf of local environmental issues. Peace work is central to many long term efforts around the Yearly Meeting, letter-writing and visiting elected officials, regular vigils and demonstrations on local, national and international issues and support of refugee and immigrant issues in many communities. Other meetings support local food cupboards, soup kitchens, donate gently used furniture and a variety of other service projects.

Our prison worship groups shared deeply the value of their time together; reminding the wider circle of the Yearly Meeting that within those walls is the “hardest place to live out being a Quaker and living the testimonies.” Their wise and Faith rich words included: “In an oppressive environment, the Spirit in us can break down and die....But the Light within cannot be extinguished. In our circle, we offer affirmation – a reflection of how far we have come as individuals and as a community.” Another group wrote: “There are many people in prison who make maintaining Integrity very difficult....Friends help us check when we are in danger of hiding our self or succumbing to the prison culture....We understand that an important part of Integrity is intent. No matter how an interaction turns out, we and those who support us, focus on our intent to decide whether we are maintaining our Integrity.” “We can bring insight into how our environment has impacted and continues to impact the choices we make. There is a Ying/Yang to life in prison and one of the gifts we have to give is helping others see that and being aware when we need that insight ourselves.”

At the end of completing their report this year, one meeting concluded “there was agreement that the process, and the report itself, have been tremendously valuable to us, in ways known and yet to be known” and indicated they continue to welcome the process of creating their “State of the Meeting” report. On behalf of the Ministry and Counsel Coordinating Committee for New York Yearly Meeting, the writers of this year’s State of Society report invite each of our meetings and worship groups to consider this statement, and to be open to the value of the annual opportunity for shared community conversations.

Compiled and respectfully submitted by Anne Liske and Anita Paul, State of Society Committee