**Report from the Young Adult Field Secretary**

**New York Yearly Meeting**

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Good morning, Friends.

Frequently this year I was asked by meetings and individuals to talk to them about how to attract more Young Adults and Families. They explain to me, how their Meeting is dying and they need to get more young people. I hear this as a very pressing and serious concern. I also travel around and witness that there are a lot of great things happening in many of the monthly meetings of this Yearly Meeting, and not only that, but there are indeed Young Adults and Families that are involved.

In my survey of 151 Young Adults in NYYM, 76 did not grow up as Quakers. That is huge. That means that more than half of our Young Adults are coming to our meetings with little knowledge of Quakerism. We have an amazing opportunity here. 86 of the respondents to my survey did not grow up in the meeting they attend. So even those who do grow up as Quakers move, and find new communities. There are opportunities all over for Young Adults and Families.

The language we use is powerful. I hear, repeatedly, how people refer to Quakerism as dying, and it really impacts me. I think that one step to growth is to ***stop saying we are dying.*** Imagine receiving an invitation. The invitation reads PLEASE COME, WE ARE DYING AND IF YOU COME WE MIGHT STAND A CHANCE AT SURVIVAL. The person then goes on to say that the gathering will be awful, no one interesting will be there, it will probably end five minutes after it starts, and you probably have better plans anyway. But if you have nothing better to do, you can come.

I hear the concern and deep anxiety that we are dwindling in numbers and our meetings are tired, overworked, and overwhelmed with committee work, and want fresh life. It is human nature to focus on the sad, bad, and difficult. I wonder if there is a way to examine our language, and our relationship with our Meetings *as they are*. Friends, I believe that life attracts life. Early Friends had a vibrant movement. They were filled to exploding over the Good News they were experiencing and the Fire God was asking them to spread. And spread it did because people witnessed that there was something really moving there, and they could not wait to be a part of it. It is easy to think that when I talk about “dying” that this is about age. I have encountered deeply alive, spiritual people of all ages, some quite young, others quite old. This is not about age; we are *all* part of this work.

What if instead the invitation you get to our hypothetical event reads, “YOU ARE INVITED TO JOIN OUR DIVINE EXPERIMENT, WHICH IS ALWAYS REVEALING ITSELF AND WILL FILL YOU WITH THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES YOU LONG FOR.” Think of a great event you have been a part of. One where you really felt welcomed and the hospitality was really good. Maybe it was a party, a quiet evening by a fire with a friend, or a satisfying debate over dinner. Most likely it was a place where there was some sort of energy, purpose, passion, life, presence. Perhaps you were greeted warmly, or given a preview of what was going to happen. Perhaps you were listened to. What made that place a place you wanted to be?

What if we cultivate what is ALIVE in our meetings, and practice radical hospitality to each other and to anyone we encounter? What if we see ourselves as divine hosts, and think carefully about how we provide hospitality, radical hospitality, while they are there. This hospitality, the giving a*nd the receiving* of it, is part of being present to God and to each other and manifest what is ALIVE and revealing itself to us. I have been welcomed, lovingly into many of your meetings and homes. I have heard about support committees, the loving care you give each other, the schools you oversee, the meals you share, your Quaker Quests, the groups of Young Adults that gather in fellowship and worship, intergenerational worships, new worship groups, and retreats. There are so many great things happening in the meetings I visit. This is not to say that there is not also struggle, and fatigue in some meetings. But what I invite us to do is to look deeply for the ways that we are already alive. The party is already happening, *even if no one else comes.*

There are many ways to manifest radical hospitality, and it looks different for each person. Perhaps it is making sure others are comfortable, or introducing them to other people they have things in common with. Some people are good at asking about and anticipating the needs of others. Some people show hospitality through food or keeping a clean welcoming space, some people can talk about their faith eloquently, some live in response to their experience with God, and never speak a word of it. Some make sure there is an entry point for a guest, and that they will feel tended to for the *whole* time they are there. How can we *each* manifest what is most alive in us, and share that with others, new or not?

I often hear *how long* people feel new. It is MUCH longer than the meeting perceives them as new. Because meetings are so thirsty for young people and families, I think we forget that they can feel new for a long time (sometimes years). They need to learn our history, our acronyms, our peculiar practices. They might need to learn what gifts they have, forget about on what committee they will be well used. They might need to hear about *our* individual journeys, leadings and gifts. They might not understand this peculiar tradition, and might need a present host to guide them through, for a while; could be a long while.

In my survey I asked “what are your needs as Young Adult Friends and Families?” and “What are you hungry for?” I found myself excited by the answers, and hopeful. Some responses were:

* Understanding procedures and practices.
* Feeling welcomed.
* “Eldering (even though we do not like to admit it).”
* Nurturing spiritual gifts.
* “We need connections, responsibility and Guidance.”
* Deep worship.
* Prayer life.
* Hearing the spiritual journeys of others.
* “Opportunities to explore both silence and conversations with diverse friends.”
* “I want to journey with people into our preconceived notions and spirituality.”
* “People expressing interest in who I am, combined with being able to see that the community is thoughtful and loving to itself and others.”

The responses were not limited to going where there were other young people. *They mostly want connection, in this world that is more and more disconnected, and deeper spiritual discourse in this world that is more and more secular*. Isn’t that what many people want, regardless of age? The good news is that there is great value and life in the practices of Friends. Many people are looking for the very practices that are central to our tradition. Whether or not anyone new comes to us, we can be alive in our faith communities.

Friends, we have a call. We have a call to be good hosts, and to be guides, not just to new comers. We are sometimes so afraid of telling people what to believe, and what to do, that we do not share what is life-giving. And because of that fear, we do not engage people where they long to be. Many people, younger and older, that I have spoken to in my travels have talked about the importance of SOMEONE in their life who saw them, heard them, and made an impact on their life. That person may never know they had this impact. But in being present to them, they changed that person’s life, forever. They became a guidepost in their spiritual journey. I would venture a guess that you have someone in your life who did this for you. This is not age dependent. Young and old can be present to each other. We have the amazing opportunity to walk with each other, and to know each other deeply, and to answer to that of God in each other.

I think that sometimes in our most well-meaning attempts to make people included, we rush to find them something to do. It might be helpful to allow people time to see either where they fit into what already exists, or to see that there is room for them to do work they see as alive in themselves. Here are three quotes that might give us a perspective on how our fear is read by new comers.

* “The hunger in the eyes of Quakers for youthful participation has disturbed me.”
* “My monthly meeting eagerly pursued my attendance on committee not more than three weeks after I met them, and I have been lapsed ever since.” And . . .
* “I was an attender at a meeting in Ohio and they were constantly asking me to be on a committee and give back, except I truly didn’t have the time to commit.”

This is in no way to induce guilt. I know that this eagerness comes from a good place. What I invite us to sit with is how our language might be coming across. What newcomers, or longtimers for that matter, might hear is that they can’t find people to serve on committees. So, why would they jump in? Would they want to end up like the very tired people they see? (remember they still feel new!) When asked on my survey why they did not do committee work, the top answers of those who responded were: 35 said they did not want to sign up for too much, 32 said they did not know what they were led to do, 31 said they do not know what is available, 18 said they do not know how their gifts would be best used.

This leads me to wonder, how do we portray committee work, and what is available? How do we talk to our youth, and our membership about committee work and worship? Do we portray these things as better to be avoided because they are boring and life-sucking? Are there ways to be involved in service to the meeting that does not require a committee commitment? Can we prune what is no longer alive? Do we welcome new life as it arises?

Can we *please acknowledge* that there is a problem with burnout in our Yearly Meeting and our monthly meetings? Can we please lovingly address the needs of those who are doing too much? This is as much a ministry to the life of the meeting as it is the individual. This is part of radical hospitality.

I want to say again, I witness life in our meetings! When I asked about positive experiences in my survey, here are some responses I got:

* Powell House and other conferences.
* “Being asked to serve in a way that my matched gifts.”
* “Hearing about life stories of older Quakers.”
* “People being open, explaining, struggling with spiritual questions.”
* “Inviting me to volunteer or be part of the service of the meeting.”
* “Going to Sessions and meeting F/friends who accepted me on my own terms and engaged me in spiritually enriching and seeking conversations, and journeying through those together.”

We have so much to share, and we do. We have opportunities to be present to each other, and God, and share our lives with everyone that is part of our meetings. What we *can* do is share the witness of how God is manifesting in our lives, and in our meetings, in struggle, in service, in connections, in matters of conscience. This work belongs to all of us, at every age. How can we be good hosts and answer to that of God in all whom we encounter? How can we be good guests and engage with the party we are being offered? Do we see our whole life, and our relationships to others, as a testimony to how God is moving in us? Then, as we live into that witness, *we are alive*.

Respectfully Submitted,

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