

State of Society Report

Each year, monthly meetings and worship groups are asked to summarize their spiritual experience in State of the Meeting reports. These reports are used by the State of Society Committee to consider the state of the yearly meeting as a whole. This year, the following queries were offered as possible guides:

1. How does ministry thrive in our meetings? How do we identify and support the ministries rising among us? Do we communicate our faith with tenderness and honesty to each other, to our meetings, and to the larger world?
2. Every meeting carries part of the long legacy of Quaker faith and practice. What do we contribute to that legacy? Are we called to participate in non-Quaker movements that express or could use Quaker values?

These two queries—how do we minister, and what do we add to Quaker legacy—called forth a mixture of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the monthly meetings. On one hand, we enjoy the ways we can continue the practices and values of the past. We take care of each other and try to speak constructively to the world. On the other hand, we wonder about our vitality in spoken ministry and our path forward in conflict inside and outside our meetings.

Meetings defined ministry in a variety of ways, drawing distinctions between ministry to the larger community, to the

meeting, and to one another. One meeting said they understand the term “ministry” both in the sense of spoken words that carry the Spirit during meeting for worship, and in the sense of activities that carry the Spirit to those in the meeting and beyond it. Some defined ministry as caretaking on a large and small scale, or as identifying and following leadings that arise from meeting for worship. Others focused on the spoken messages and the quality of the silence during meeting for worship.

Friends minister to each other by providing pastoral care, providing rides to Friends who find it difficult to make it to meeting for worship, or visiting and sharing worship at a housebound Friend’s home. There is pastoral ministry in speaking thoughtfully with others during a social hour, and in washing dishes when the social hour is over.

Ministering to the outside world includes making Quakerism, and one’s meeting, more visible, with hopes that this visibility will help people come into deepening relationship with one another and the Divine. Meetings send out press releases to local media about events, participate in open houses, and improve signage at their meetinghouses. Meetings participate in local ecumenical groups, and often join in local protests and actions. Many meetings maintain regular and long-standing peace vigils in their communities. Meetinghouses lend their space to community groups in need, providing a form of ministry to these groups and outreach to their community.

Ministry is part of the blessing of Quaker process within meetings. One meeting states, “The process of discernment with members of a clearness committee is one of the great gifts of the Society of Friends.” A leading that is rising up in an individual can be tested, refined, and supported. A well-functioning Nominating Committee can get to know a meeting’s members and attenders and help identify an individual’s gifts.

Functioning, active committees in a monthly meeting are a sign of a healthy ministry and are the legacy of Quaker practice. Several meetings have struggled to fill committees or complete the necessary business of their meeting and have created new ways of doing business. One meeting has tried having all its committees meet on the same day at their meetinghouse, so that Friends could easily attend any committee meeting they’re led to attend. Meetings have committees in which a clerk could not be found so the clerkship rotates among its members, a situation that works out well. One meeting sends out reports to

be read before business meetings, “so that more time is available in Meeting for Business to discern spiritual matters.”

Meetings reported special concern for vocal ministry that is spoken during meeting for worship. A few meetings reported talkative, “popcorn” style meetings—sometimes due to an influx of newcomers—and one has recently recorded two members’ calls to ministry. But many unprogrammed meetings seem to be experiencing mostly or completely silent hours of worship every First Day. The quality of this silent worship is often treasured by its participants, even as some worry about this lack of verbal participation. Many meetings report that there will often be a completely silent hour of worship followed by a lively and vocal period of afterthoughts or worship sharing. Some Friends wonder why this is; are Friends feeling too intimidated to break the silence? Are they having difficulty identifying messages that may come to them? Some Christ-centered Friends feel hesitant to speak because they are afraid their messages will not be welcomed. One meeting reports, “The more we sit in silence, the quieter we get. Hesitancy to speak leaves a void. We are working on ways to invite Friends to test the water and open ourselves to share the messages rising within us so that we can deepen our spiritual connections with each other.”

A few meetings have struggled with painful interpersonal conflicts over the past year. In some cases this has driven a member to transfer to another meeting or stop attending altogether. Quakers can have difficulty resolving conflict when silence is used to avoid painful discussion. Dealing with conflict can make people uncomfortable, angry, and sad, so disagreements can linger long without resolution. One meeting said “Our failure to deal effectively with conflict remains troubling.... We seek strategies to prevent and alleviate relationship difficulties between Friends and for resolving conflict when necessary.”

In good times and bad, every meeting and every Friend carries part of the long legacy of Quaker faith and practice. Many Friends report that they witness to Quaker values in all their actions. Friends feel strongly about continuing the Quaker legacy of equality and social justice, whether within a Quaker context or not. Friends are currently involved in a large number of concerns, including earthcare, especially protesting, educating, and writing minutes against hydraulic fracturing; racism concerns, including the racism in the criminal justice

system and raising awareness of white privilege; participation in the Aging, Resources Consultation and Help (ARCH) program and in the Alternatives to Violence Project; support for Friends who conscientiously object to war taxes; and visiting in prisons. Quakers are also involved in actions in their communities, including the holding of peace vigils, support for immigrant and refugee families, fighting hunger and homelessness, and advocating for healthcare for all.

The Occupy Wall Street movement in particular has inspired Friends. The Occupy movement echoes Quaker values with a nonviolent, open-ended decisionmaking process that models what one meeting called “acceptance of ambiguity, giving up control, not having to have resolution right away.” Meetings in the New York City area have provided shelter, support, and on-site meetings for worship for Occupy protesters. At the end of 2011, a process of discernment was ongoing in several meetings to consider future engagement.

Several meetings held well-attended public events for the tenth anniversary of 9/11. A New York City meeting combined worship, worship sharing, film, and a long banner stretched outside where people could write messages. Farther north, Friends led a public healing where “over a hundred gathered at the foot of Otsego Lake symbolically to wash their hands of the past decade’s fears, animosities, and recriminations. Many of that large crowd belonged to none of the village’s congregations but were drawn to the ceremony because of shared values.”

The Quaker legacy of concern for those in prison finds vibrant expression in prison worship-sharing groups. The ministry in those meetings takes the form of active listening and acceptance of each other, transcending the barriers of race, gender, and ethnicity. Those within prison report they are spiritually enriched by visitors from the Yearly Meeting. Their ministry also includes participation in the Alternatives to Violence Project, letter-writing campaigns about posttraumatic stress disorder, and Reconciliation Workshops.

Meetings with historic meetinghouses feel the legacy of Quakerism in a very concrete way. Historic building tours and open houses give meetings an opportunity for outreach. Friends treasure the history present in their meetinghouses, though they are also challenged by the cost and energy of maintaining a historic structure. Other meetings have recently repaired, expanded, or moved their meetinghouses, projects that

often serve to draw a meeting's participants closer together.

Some of our meetings have been faced with dwindling numbers of members and attenders. Friends move away or die. Some meetings have aging members and no newcomers on the horizon, or have lost beloved elders. Sometimes a lack of a standing First Day school can keep people away. Meetings that encompass large geographic areas find it difficult to gather together a scattered demographic every week. But other meetings have been growing in numbers and diversity, which brings great joy. An increase in newcomers can lead to growing pains as newcomers learn about Quaker practice. And older, smaller meetings can be blessedly familiar and intimate. Meetings ebb and flow with time. Says one smaller meeting: "Compared with last year our numbers are smaller; our energy low. The water is there but the strength of the flow is down; ebb flow. We are in Expectant Waiting; a solidity of centeredness that is waiting for the next tide."

Meetings provide a space for safety, nurturing, and spiritual presence. People talk about their meetings as their homes, as the soil in which they grow, as their families. One Friend described meeting for worship by saying, "I'm coming home when I'm here." Another meeting reported, "The connections that we forge foster a spirit that we believe we carry with us throughout the week...holding each other in the Light habitually." Meetings know how to make "a sacred space in support of the spiritual growth of members and attenders both as individuals and in community....Where two or three are gathered there is a Presence and a Power and in that lies our faith, our hope, and our ministry."

As Friends, we treasure our legacy and frequently remember what Friends have done and said in the past. Questions are always rising within New York Yearly Meeting about what we are called to do now, in the social, political, and economic world that exists now, and what we might say, to each other and to the world, speaking from our safe houses. We pray that we may be not just comforted but also inspired, even unsettled, by the voice of the Spirit that created the legacy in the first place.