

***Building Up the Life of Our Meetings:  
A Retreat for Those with a Call to Eldering and a Concern for Vital Worship  
Eldering Consultation Report, January 2013***

We have people in our meetings whose way of being a Quaker is to ground and to hold an individual, a group, a meeting ... to elder. In New England and New York we are learning this often silent ministry can lead an individual or the corporate body to new insights.

In December 2012, the first joint eldery consultation between New England and New York Yearly Meeting Friends was held at Woolman Hill Retreat Center, in Deerfield, MA. The purpose of the retreat was to give Friends who have the gift of eldery an opportunity to share our experiences; to learn from one another; to explore the various ways in which we elder; to discuss the challenges we've faced and how we deal with them; and to talk about how to draw out gifts of eldery in others.

A total of 42 people participated. The planning group developed lists of invitees from each yearly meeting. For New England, 21 Friends were invited, of whom 20 registered and 19 attended (one registrant had to cancel due to a loved one's death). For New York, 26 Friends were invited, of whom 15 attended.

Five members of the planning group attended: three from NEYM, two from NYYM (an additional NYYM member was not able to attend due to scheduling conflicts). Woolman Hill staff member Margaret Cooley also participated in the planning group and in the retreat itself. Ken and Katharine Jacobsen (Ohio Yearly Meeting Conservative) served as the facilitation team.

There was an incredibly strong response to the invitation, and we decided to accept everyone who registered rather than limit the number who could participate. That meant that we housed seven people at a nearby motel in order to ease overcrowding in the Woolman Hill overnight accommodations. This arrangement seemed to work well. The group size was larger than we'd initially planned for, and for future gatherings we recommend either adding members to the facilitation team or decreasing the number of participants. Throughout the planning, we were aware that the list of those invited was in no way comprehensive, that there are many Friends with eldery gifts in our midst, and that this gathering would be only a first step.

Strengths of the gathering included the diversity of age, the breadth of meetings represented, and intentionally drawing participants from more than one yearly meeting. We were blessed by the rich tradition and knowledge of eldery in the Conservative branch brought by Ken and Katharine. Despite the diversity of styles, perspectives and reactions, we were struck by a palpable commonality and by a deep hunger to connect around experiences of eldery. The dialogue between New England and New York Friends was particularly fruitful and many participants expressed hope that it will continue.

During our opening night we were asked this query: "To me, at this time, the primary work of the elder is \_\_\_\_\_." These were just three of the responses:

- To listen to the breath of truth breathing through the collective body
- To mind the center and to aid in its revelation
- To be centered in The Presence, in God, and from that center to anchor the individual or group for whom he or she is being elder

(The complete list of responses is attached.)

Those of us on the planning team looked at this consultation as somewhat of an experiment. We had a tentative plan, but while waiting on Spirit, vocal ministry led us to a different place. We made space for a concern and for what followed that concern. The body prayer that Ken and Katharine Jacobsen shared with us, and which was repeated a number of times throughout the weekend, grounded us: “release and return, encounter and accept, attend and live out.” Throughout, we were graced by the eldership of Ken and Katharine.

- The gathered witness and acknowledgement that eldering is one of the Gifts of the Spirit
- Communion with other Friends and with God. The keen awareness of Ken and Katharine in following Spirit and their willingness to release expectation and normal time conventions in order to be honest and Truthful to God was perhaps the best example for us all and with which I will walk away
- Sharing with others; learning that we have much to help each other with
- That we are all varied in condition and experience and the overall learning is to welcome this and to be at peace with it--it is all just a blink of God’s eye

These were just some of the responses to “What has been most helpful to you in this workshop? What learnings will you take away?”

This consultation was a beginning. Next steps might include planning a weekend that would focus on concrete tips for carrying out the work of eldering (Eldering 101), providing opportunities for Friends to share the actual joys and challenges of eldering within and beyond our meetings, gatherings of elders on a quarterly or regional level, and scheduling annual gatherings of New York/New England elders.

In our closing worship a Friend offered the following quote: *“We have not succeeded in answering all our problems. The answers we have found only serve to raise a whole set of new questions. In some ways we feel we are as confused as ever but we believe we are confused on a higher level and about more important things.”* (Bonnie Love)

#### Planning Group

New York Yearly Meeting: Lu Harper, Kristina Keefe-Perry, Anne Pomeroy

New England Yearly Meeting: Margaret Cooley, Ann Dodd-Collins, Kristna Evans, Janet Hough

## *RESPONSES TO QUERY*

### **The primary work of the elder is:**

- To hold the container for the body
- To be a servant of God
- To support, to listen
- To always show up, be a consistent presence reflecting the light and love within the community in service to truth
- To lead by being a living example of the transformative power of love and of humility
- To nurture individuals and the body in living ever more fully into faithfulness to the call of truth and love
- To ground every encounter in/with integrity
- To be with those who minister – to listen, to be in constant prayer, to walk beside, to reflect back
- Grounding the group or individual, rooting to the Spirit
- To listen to the breath of truth breathing through the collective body
- To watch what comes/unfolds
- To love, hold in love
- To provide guidance to those in pain, those grieving, and going through hardship, but not to forget their own pain. An elder is kind of like a wise therapist that won't charge you money
- To behold another as God beholds that person – with love, love, love – tender regard and clarity
- To be used by God in creating space for encounters with the Holy – in individuals and in groups. To be used by God in God's ministry to us as the Body of Christ
- To strengthen through prayer, presence, holding in the Light – individuals in whom the Spirit is moving, the meeting as a whole, situations, questions alive in the meeting arising to more deeply call forth the Spirit within it
- To bring/feel/recognize God's presence and love and to hold others in it
- To hold my Pastor in a loving space, and to hold my meeting in a loving space – Light-filled, gentle, enveloping, and loving space
- To be midwife to ministry – accompany, comfort, watch the health of minister and message

- To hold the space, to hold the center, to channel love/energy, to reflect love/energy, to deflect other
- To mind the center and to aid in its revelation
- Holding a Holy Space – finding It, embracing it, in Love
- To lovingly hold and nurture the person or community that is seeking to do God's will
- To listen to God within self, group, other individuals and reflect that as needed
- To hold the Meeting in prayer
- To hold up the veil we imagine separates us from God, that we might see past it. To listen always for love
- To nurture and to guide; to be open and to love selflessly and self-fully
- To listen deeply; to love deeply; to be ever vigilant; to empty oneself of one's self, so that the Divine Presence flows freely within and without; being examples of love, light, truth, and compassion
- To love and to radically trust that the Divine Teacher intends to use you to draw love into the world and out of those around you and make it more visible
- Encouraging nurturer
- To midwife God's reality into the present, through creating a space, holding the vision and embodying the hope of the body she/he serves
- To bear witness to God's presence and to abide with those who suffer
- To love and to name and nurture gifts of the Spirit in others
- To encourage and facilitate growth
- To dissolve self into receptive prayer for, and discernment in, the Body – the living embodiment of Spirit
- To hold and lift up before God the gathered body and/or individuals within the body
- To be centered in The Presence, in God, and from that center to anchor the individual or group for whom he or she is being elder
- To listen; to spiritually discern, to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit
- To love the Meeting; this action will happen in a variety of ways, through prayer, listening, and being present, writing, teaching. At its basis, the command, gift and blessed work is simply and completely to love the meeting
- To channel God's love fully into the present moment