

Report on Meeting for Discernment

July 24, 2012
Silver Bay, NY

On July 24, 2012 Meeting for Discernment convened for the fifth time at Silver Bay, and the tenth time overall. Held in the auditorium, Meeting for Discernment assembled in worship during a morning session, followed by a break for lunch, and then concluded with an afternoon session. About 120 Friends attended the morning session and 85 Friends attended the afternoon session.

The morning session was clerked by Jeff Hitchcock, and fifteen Friends brought forth messages. Steven Mohlke clerked the afternoon session, during which time eleven more Friends spoke. At least one Friend from each of the nine regions in the Yearly Meeting was heard from. No Friend spoke more than once.

The meeting was held by the presence of more than two dozen Friends invited to serve as elders, with some serving during the morning session and others serving during the afternoon so that the weight of the task did not fall too heavily upon any one person. Friends serving as elders had met the prior Sunday evening, the first day of the summer sessions, to worship together and discuss plans for the forthcoming Meeting for Discernment. The Sunday evening session was clerked by Kristina Keefe-Perry.

Four Friends volunteered as note takers. Robin Alpern and Lu Harper served for the morning session. John Edminster and Ann Pomeroy served for the afternoon session.

On Tuesday night, a follow up meeting of reflection and discussion was held among roughly 40 Friends who had attended the day's Meeting for Discernment. The session was clerked by Roger Dreisbach-Williams.

Two queries were used for the Meeting for Discernment.

In the morning, Friends were asked:

How do we know what is true and how do we share it as Friends and as Meetings? How do our meetings respond to the challenges that living with integrity presents?

In the afternoon, Friends were asked:

Where is the Spirit of Truth leading our meetings? Are we following it toward greater wholeness? What are the challenges?

What we heard

How do we know what is true and how do we share it as Friends and as Meetings?

One Friend spoke of a monthly meeting that held a retreat to consider basic questions about Quakerism. They found that they had many different answers. Yet they later found Truth in their love for one another.

Some felt that Truth cannot be grasped in its fullness. A Friend quoted Paul, “We know in part and we prophesize in part.” Another likened our knowledge of the Truth to seeing it emerge incomplete from a fog bank and sometimes requiring us to seek experts to interpret it.

One Friend said that in his meeting Friends searched their souls and found an unadulterated Truth: we have within us a beautiful shining light that allows us to rise above our shortcomings and strike down walls that weaken us.

A Friend spoke of a meeting struggling with division. Friends held different “perceptions of truth.” As Friends, it is our collective discernment that leads us to the Truth, he observed, and this may take us a very long time. As we seek answers, we need to remain united as a community of love.

Friends spoke to the role of collective processes like business meeting, and committees of care and clearness. No single person carries the full measure of truth, one observed. It is only when we find our way to the source and are able to call on Spirit, both directly and through other Friends, that we as a collective body begin to acknowledge Truth. Another recognized those who serve and sit in discernment with those who do ministry, saying that in her case their discernment and accountability were the spirit of Truth that guided her in her ministry without her being enmeshed in her ego.

A Friend spoke about Christ, the Christ within and the Christ among us, the Holy Spirit as the source of Power for Jesus that is infinite, unchanging and will lead us to the Truth. Another Friend spoke about the Spirit of Truth as coming without form, from time to time, with an overwhelming sense of love and compassion because that is its nature.

Where is the Spirit of Truth leading our meetings? Are we following it toward greater wholeness?

Friends spoke of Truth leading them in the management of resources. One regional meeting had accumulated a significant balance in their treasury and decided they had no need for it, so they called for proposals for the use of funds. The proposals matched with available funds so that all received funding, creating an occasion for binding the meetings of the region together in a different way. Another Friend said the Spirit of Truth has led

their meeting to put their meeting house up for sale, knowing the space is more than they need and the demands of upkeep more than they can sustain. “I believe Christ has led us thus far and will lead us through all the challenges that lie ahead.”

Friends spoke of individual leadings of Friends in social witness that were beginning to work upon their meetings and the wider Quaker community as a whole. One Friend held a concern for single payer health care and spoke of being joined with other Friends in civil disobedience and marching. In another meeting a Friend held a concern for child labor and trafficking. The meeting supported her in her individual ministry but had not yet come to holding a corporate witness.

Another meeting was drawn together when discerning an action that involved both stewardship of resources and a human justice witness. Being short of funds to maintain their school, they hired an undocumented woman known to them, at a living wage, providing a livelihood for her and her two children. A Friend from another meeting spoke of searching for Spirit in wanting to have drinking water not poisoned by fracking.

Friends spoke of meetings not yet united in Spirit, but experiencing the beginning of a readiness to undertake the journey together. One Friend said she knew that when her meeting was ready to call on Spirit both directly and through Friends, they would find their way to that place of deep integrity and wholeness. Another Friend described the importance of listening for Spirit when coming together to find the way forward.

Challenges

Both the morning and afternoon queries asked about challenges Friends faced. Many challenges were named.

Challenges to the self

One Friend spoke of how we are caught up in our egos and self-righteousness, but if we let go, we allow the Light to use us as vessels for a greater purpose. Telling the truth can be difficult, another Friend pointed out, when we think it will make someone angry with us.

A Friend spoke about the fear she felt when hearing a call from God, and having “gotten used to it being easier for God to love me the way I am than I do.”

One Friend spoke of receiving support from her meeting and placing her trust in God as she struggles with the State of NJ to find safe housing and care for her adult autistic child.

Challenges to meetings from within

Several Friends spoke of people in their meetings not really knowing each other well. A Friend emphasized the need for active listening in her meeting. In two other meetings Friends told of activities such as discussion groups that were intended to give participants a better understanding of each other. A Friend from a meeting that has experienced division said Friends had sought peace through silence, but he felt Friends should have faith in our process, which may take a long time. Another Friend, speaking directly afterwards, also placed her faith in Friends' process. Her meeting was divided, too, and did not have a sense of wholeness. But she felt a continued waiting for readiness to call on Spirit would lead to integrity and wholeness.

One meeting found that a couple had left because they felt Christocentric messages were not welcome. As a result the meeting has given renewed attention to spiritual activities, such as worship sharing, which they have done as well in the past but not so recently.

Sometimes seemingly simple decisions can be complicated. Should new construction include "green" practices? What about the added expense, or the ability of future Friends to maintain the property? Should a meeting add air conditioning? How to balance the concern for conserving energy with the medical fact that some Friends cannot attend at a location where the heat is excessive?

One meeting came to the decision to sell its historic meeting house, which had become too much to maintain. It raised the question of who they will be without the structure.

Challenges to meetings from without

Two meetings faced difficulties with other persons and organizations in the secular world. In one case a contractor had encroached on meeting property and installed a construction fence in their graveyard. In the other case, the meeting sought permits for their new building. Friends in each case were caught up in the immediacy and frustration of the events and later found time to settle and listen for what God would have them do. The answers were not always clear.

Challenges to the Society of Friends

Knowing the Truth is difficult. Some who claim to know the Truth divide us up into little sects and fly airplanes into buildings, one Friend said. It also may take time, even generations he added, drawing upon the example of the many years it took Friends to become clear on the sin of slaveholding. Another Friend also mentioned how details of the struggle and search for Truth among Friends in the past become forgotten. There was more to it than we realize.

Friends from several meetings variously mentioned that Friends do not share a common theology or set of beliefs. This might appear to be a problem internal to meetings, but the concern was lifted up so often it seems to have wider implications for the Yearly Meeting and beyond. Responses varied. In some cases Friends were able to share beliefs and draw closer to one another simply through that act of sharing. In other cases, the lack of a shared theology was seen as a source of division. Although never so much as to completely divide a meeting, this division sometimes made it difficult for Friends to come together in making decisions.

Some Friends were clear that we are called to be forthright in our beliefs. One Friend said it is hard for us to name the “darkness” because we fear we might offend someone. We are led by the Christ within, but others in our culture have used the name of Christ to commit unspeakable horrors supported by billions in gold and armaments. We will be known by our fruit.

Another Friend spoke about how his meeting has a culture that does not allow people to speak openly about God, Jesus, Christ, faith or prayer. What does this mean to a faith community that has as its central tenet that we all have that of God within, he wondered. And how can we live in integrity when we are unable to express our most closely held beliefs? This was more than a concern for just his meeting, he noted.

Many people come to Quakerism with a history of deep hurt from other faith communities that have used the terms referring to God and Christ in their language, and they experience pain at the hands of others using that language, a Friend explained in the final message of the day.

Truth can be difficult to discern. Many Friends hold deeply to a faith in God and Christ, and we are a faith community with deep Christian roots. Others seek shelter from an imposed theology and do not hold such beliefs as their personal views. Yet Friends seem confident in our process of corporate searching for Truth, and believe that the integrity of our practice lies within and through that process. It may take time, even on a historic scale, but our corporate process has guided Friends in the past and continues today. Friends voiced challenges at many levels in the search for integrity, but they also voiced many approaches and some solutions as well. We continue to find life as a spiritual community.

This report was written by the outgoing clerk of the Meetings for Discernment Steering Committee, Jeff Hitchcock, and reviewed by the incoming clerk, Lucinda Antrim, and members of the Steering Committee.