

Where We've Been, Where We Are, and Where We Are Called

Good morning Friends. Each year when I write up the report on the previous year's work for my Advance Report, I have an acute sense of both how far we have come, and also how much work I see before us. As I wrap up my work serving you as General Secretary, I feel both of those sentiments even more acutely. In my reports to our sessions I usually focus on reflecting back to this body my sense of our current condition as a whole yearly meeting. Today it seems important to not only name where I see us in the moment, but also where we are in the arc of our life as a yearly meeting, the work we have done, work we are engaged in, and the work I see still before us.

Here is my overall sense, one I'll flesh out in what is to follow: We are poised. We are poised on the brink of growth in depth, growth in numbers, growth in witness, and growth in overall health. And as I prepare to leave this service at this particular point in the life of this yearly meeting, I must confess I feel like Moses knowing he won't get to enter into the Promised Land with the rest of the Hebrew host. I witness the energy and life in this body, and see the potential ahead, and I am wistful, sad to not be a part of it, but also clear that that is not my work, but someone else's.

At our summer session, 2006, I named six areas which needed attention and care:

- 1. Closing the divide that separates Monthly Meetings from the Yearly Meeting organizational structure.**
- 2. Coming to a unified, clear vision of who we are, where we are going, and why.**
- 3. Passing on the substance of our faith to our children.**
- 4. Becoming more skillful at resolving conflict.**
- 5. Better welcoming and integrating the newcomers who are joining us.**
- 6. Addressing the spiritual nurture of existing Friends.**

We have done, or are doing, much of this work. Some of it is never "done."

- We have significantly lessened the substantial gap between those Friends with little interest in the work of the yearly meeting organization and those who value it greatly.
- With the work of the Priorities Working Group, this body has united in a common vision of our work as a yearly meeting.
- With the hiring of a Children and Youth Field Secretary (CYFS), creating the Monthly Meeting Partner Project, holding the Youth Institutes put on with support of Powell House Youth Directors, the Youth Committee, and the CYFS, and a clear intentionality to address the spiritual nurture of our youngest Friends, we are taking up the work of passing on our practice to our children.
- Our Conflict Transformation Committee has become an effective resource for our monthly meetings, our committees, and our sessions. We have become more skillful in addressing conflict, and less fearful of facing it head on.

- Our Young Adult Field Secretary has helped us to become more skillful at welcoming and integrating not just young adults, but Friends of all ages. Our new Outreach Working Group is creating a community of practice which is energizing and inspiring the fifteen monthly meetings currently participating in it, and whose work is addressing the perpetual requests for help from monthly meetings in how to do more effective outreach.
- Through having the Drawing Out Gifts, Kindling the Fire, and most recently, the Tending the Garden series of workshops and retreats, we have formed a broadly based community of Friends who carry a passionate concern for the spiritual nurture of this yearly meeting.

The economic crash of 2008 had a lot of Quaker institutions doing significant soul-searching as to their vision and mission. Our yearly meeting organization was no exception. We engaged in a three and a half year process of visiting all of our monthly meetings and as many of our worship groups as possible, and listening for where the Life was in those communities, and how the rest of the yearly meeting could support that Life. Through a process of listening and discernment, we ultimately united in our Statement of Leadings and Priorities, a broad sense of how to prioritize the budgeting of our operating budget, our trustee managed funds, and our staff time. We are currently living into that process, with the Leadings and Priorities Support Working Group engaged in assessing just how well the yearly meeting organization is following up on what we heard from our grass roots constituency.

Part way through that process, I named the need for us as an organization to focus on three areas in order to maintain our fiscal health and ability as an organization to serve our constituency well: Vision, Communication, and Development. As I just mentioned, we did come through a process with a coherent vision for our common work. And we created a Development Committee, whose contributions to our budget have helped to offset cuts in our Covenant Donations made after the 2008 crash. We created the new job description for our Communications Director, and have gradually, sometimes haltingly, moved into the digital age in our communication. Our new website should be launched very soon, and we are doing a better job of communicating what the contributions from our monthly meetings and individual Friends support. We are just starting to become marginally effective at communicating with our younger members. With that, and our overall communication, we still need to do more to communicate to our grass roots and to the world the work in which we are engaged.

We have done *a lot*. I hope that this historical perspective is helpful in understanding where we are, and where I see us poised to go.

Until recently, the yearly meeting organization had enough financial support and therefore staff time, to not do much more than maintain the existing structure, to keep the doors open, as it were. For years I witnessed crying needs in our monthly meetings for which our minimal staff simply did not have the time or resources to address. In more recent years, with the addition of two more field staff, the Young Adult Field Secretary and Children and Youth Field Secretary, along with those now bringing the work of ARCH to our monthly meetings, I see us finally having barely enough of a staff presence to meaningfully address the needs in the field. Now Friends in our monthly meetings

may, I hope over time, be less mystified as to what the Covenant Donations from their monthly meetings goes to support.

We have done the work necessary to address the needs of our community. And, we are stretching mightily to do so. Thanks to generous contributions from individual Friends and from the reallocation of trust funds, we are sustaining the structure necessary to do the work that I strongly feel is necessary. We are stretching, and we are making that stretch, currently. And we will need to continue to stretch. In 2019, a generous multi-year grant to the annual appeal will end at the same time the Shoemaker grant supporting about half of the Children and Youth Field Secretary's salary will end, at the same time that ARCH has said that it is possible that their grant from FFA will be reduced. This is cause for concern, and prudent planning. It is also, I hope, a motivation for Friends to dig deep to support this ongoing work. This year's budget surplus is the result of a series of one-off events, none of which I see happening next year, or in subsequent years. A surplus this year does not mean that we can pause in our support of this ongoing work. Without those one-off events, this year would have shown a deficit, not a surplus.

We need to not allow ourselves to either lose focus or to lose heart. I have seen Friends really step up to the plate to support this ongoing work, with many new Friends giving to the annual appeal this year, and giving substantial sums. In the arc of our work, we are on the right track, and Friends are stepping up in surprising ways to support that work.

While I am optimistic about our current trajectory, I am not a Pollyanna. About three years ago I met with our trustees to name my concern for our condition, and of the need for the yearly meeting organization to step up with all the resources we can muster in order to address the erosion in our meetings' capacity to revitalize themselves. The need for that level of commitment has not changed. We recently had two monthly meetings alert us to their sense that they don't anticipate being able to keep the doors open for too many more years. I habitually encounter Friends who say that they are not spiritually fed in their monthly meetings. I hear of unresolved conflicts, young families leaving due to insensitivity in their new meeting, young adults who are deeply struggling to find a way into being a part of our Society, Friends of color experiencing racism in our yearly meeting, Friends deeply questioning how to live out our faith in the current political landscape. What has changed, however, is that in these past three years, the yearly meeting organization, and the yearly meeting as a whole, have radically increased in our capacity to address those problems and others.

We are not in the Promised Land, not yet, by any means. And I have faith. I have faith in us; I have faith in God; and I have faith that we are pointed in the right direction, and moving there with determination and passion.

Our work as a community will never be done. Here is some of the work in which we are mid-stride, or just opening into:

- Supporting the spiritual deepening of Friends of all ages
- Revitalizing our monthly meetings
- Addressing systemic racism
- Making Summer Sessions accessible to any Friend led to be there
- Bridging the gap in our distinction between "ministry" and "witness"
- Embracing gifts in ministry the way we have embraced gifts in elders

- Expanding the Monthly Meeting Partner Project, which helps our meetings to more effectively integrate their youngest members into the fabric of the MM
- Changing our culture around money; recognizing, as early Friends did, that money is a spiritual issue, not separate from our spiritual life
- Changing the staffing structure which supports the ARCH program
- Nurturing the current influx of newcomers
- Holding ourselves accountable to our named priorities, even if that means making some hard choices
- Having our nominating committees operating as Spirit-led engines of gifts-development for all our members and attenders
- Redefining what it means to be a young adult in this yearly meeting
- Exploring new structures others than committees for organizing our work as a community
- Seeking a corporate response to the divisiveness or our nation

I have a nudge to close with an anecdote, one which illustrates just how far we have come as a community, in trusting each other, in trusting God. Many of you were present at Fall Sessions in 2009, where we faced a \$4000 shortfall in the budget. We spent no less than three sessions agonizing about what to do about that shortfall. We were paralyzed. We never did come to clarity as to how specifically we would address that problem. Contrast that with summer sessions last year, when we were faced with a last-minute request for \$10,000 from the ARCH program to finish out that same year (and with a \$20,000 shortfall in their overall budget and the need for yet more money than *that* added to 2017's budget). Friends were clear to move forward, though still uncertain about the long-term finances for the program. After that decision, two Friends came forward, offering substantial contributions, alleviating not only the immediate need, but also much of the projected need for the 2017 budget. The decision was easy. We were clear, we were not afraid.

We have come a long, long way. I celebrate our growth in faith, our growth in trust, and our expanding capacity to care for one another.

Christopher Sammond
General Secretary