

NYYM State Of The Society Report 2012

Each year, the monthly meetings and worship groups of the NYYM are asked to reflect on the State of our Society. Queries guide us in our reflection.

Query #1: How has your meeting deepened and grown in the Light in the past year? What are the particular gifts of your meeting?

Most of our meetings report that they are spiritually strong. Many meetings reported growth, or at least have a fairly sizable base of members and attenders, with new attenders occasionally coming in. Smaller meetings treasure their size, feeling that it fosters a sense of intimacy and closeness. One meeting put it this way: our meeting is “small in number while mighty in the spirit.”

However, not all meetings reported growth in the light this past year. A few meetings are very small, with dwindling numbers and no new or young members. Two communities are wrestling with the question of whether or not to lay their meetings down. Many meetings reported budget shortfalls and difficulty fulfilling their financial commitments. Some meetings spoke of suffering and pain within their community, attributing these to conflicts, the loss of beloved Friends, or the perception that promises are not being kept.

Declining numbers can, however, carry gifts, revealing to the meeting what is essential. Remaining members struggle and learn to stay true to who they are, as any growth must be “spiritually sustainable.” When numbers fall and members leave a meeting, structures of committees may be re-examined, and some committees may be laid down or streamlined. Many meetings spoke of the challenge of doing committee work in our busy modern world. Meetings continue to struggle to fill committee positions without relying on a handful of people who are close to burnout.

There are both gifts and challenges revealed in having a growing meeting. Several meetings spoke of tensions between the wish to encourage new attenders, who may not have familiarity with Quaker values, and the wish to emphasize the traditions, faith and practice of a definitive Quakerism. How inclusive of new and different values and ideas should we be? Ought we to focus on increasing the spiritual depth and energy of current attenders and members, thereby perhaps indirectly attracting more attenders to an increasingly vital spiritual body? Or should small meetings focus energy on reaching outward to grow larger, increasing spiritual energy with new members? Perhaps new members offer us the gift of self-examination and articulation of who we are.

Our meetings desire to engage with others and the wider world. Many meetings report looking beyond Quakerism to other practices for insight and inspiration. We consider the diversity within our communities and relationships to be great gifts. We

also seem to be interacting and sharing more between programmed and unprogrammed meetings within the yearly meeting.

Many meetings also expressed great appreciation for their Meeting Houses. Other meetings acknowledge that difficult economic circumstances push the responsibility for their Meeting House toward a burden from which they need relief. Some meetings share their properties with renters. One Meeting reported significantly distressing experiences with mismanaged finances, resulting in a dire financial situation. Several meeting houses were damaged by Hurricane Sandy. The storm provided an opportunity to come together and care for one another.

Meetings grew in spiritual depth and closeness through Friendly gatherings outside of meeting for worship, such as family gatherings, movie nights, book groups, and spiritual nurture groups. Committee work can also enrich our experience of our meetings. One Meeting happily reports that “we have experienced a blessing of growth and movement of Spirit in nearly all aspects of our meeting life this year. Our committees have been more active and have seen revitalization.” A spirit of cooperation and shared purpose was noted.

Prison worship groups speak of valuing the diversity of ideas they share at their gatherings. Worship in prison is a gift to the people inside the prison walls, to the Friends who come from the outside to worship, and to the yearly meeting as a whole. There is a profound gratitude for the fellowship, the sharing, and the silent worship in meetings for worship on the inside. Some Prison meetings were among those who say they have fostered communication, listening, understanding and acceptance among each other over the past year.

Many Meetings expressed a profound sense of delight and gratitude for the gift of children in their meeting, and a renewed commitment to First Day Schools. Children are described as “treasured” members of the meeting, bringing joy and vibrancy to the gathering. Several meetings are deliberately developing intergenerational activities and worship as a community. However, some meetings do not have any children among their regular attenders or members, the lack of which is keenly felt.

Query #2: How has worship been meeting your members' and attenders' spiritual needs?

Meeting for worship is the experience most central to our faith. The connection to the Spirit is the foundation of our lives as Quakers. Friends value Quaker practice, and worship is where that practice is learned. One meeting reflected that “We are led to bring the sense of peace and unity that we experience in Meeting to the outside world, speaking to “that of God” in others we encounter in our daily lives and public places.”

Worship is described as “luminous experiences of peace and love,” and as “what holds our lives together.” Meeting provides inspiration and solace. Gathering for

meeting is restorative, a chance to slow down, to commune with the Inner Light and listen to what God would have us hear. Friends are grateful to be able to worship together. Being at meeting for worship is “a gift from all of us to each of us.” As one meeting said, “We feel the acceptance of others without judgment and try to follow Jesus’ teaching to love one another.”

One meeting referred to the dual needs for quiet and spoken ministry during worship as a “delicate balance.” Silence is deeply valued in our monthly meetings as an island of peace in a chaotic world. Some Friends dislike meetings without spoken messages, finding the perceived reticence to speak out of the silence to be a symptom of a lack of energy in our worship. One Friend shared the profound experience of hearing another’s message crystallize something within her. Programmed meetings within our yearly meeting rely upon and deeply treasure their pastor’s messages, simultaneously understanding that we have all been called to minister one to another.

Many meetings have a period of afterthoughts, messages that may not have risen to the level of “divinely given” before the rise of meeting. One meeting described afterthoughts as “a time to connect.” But some feel that the messages saved for afterthoughts could have better enriched the formal worship had they been offered during meeting.

The spiritual richness of worship can be deepened when Friends take part in religious education discussions, worship sharing and spiritual nurture groups. Friends noticed that these efforts added depth to silent waiting worship and vocal ministry, and fostered a sense of community.

Query #3: How do Friends' historical testimonies of simplicity, integrity, and equality inform your meeting's response to emerging economic, ecological, and political crises in our time? Are new practices and testimonies emerging?

Regarding the testimonies, one Friend offered the following statement: “It is not so much that our testimonies inform our work in the world. Rather, our testimonies and our work in the world are fruits that come from the same root. That root is our experience of seeking to live our lives as led by the Spirit, and that experience both informs our work as Friends, and gives meaning and life to our historic testimonies as Friends.”

Friends in our meetings continue to work for peace and justice and equality of all persons. Economic justice, confronting the prison system, the abolishment of the death penalty, racial justice, and earthcare were some of the issues mentioned most frequently by our meetings. Several meetings maintain a long-standing weekly peace vigil in their local community. Friends donate their time and money to work that supports our

testimonies. We all try to integrate Quaker values in our daily lives. One meeting simply stated, “we try to be useful.”

Working together on our testimonies requires a shared “fire in the belly.” This can be difficult to achieve. Some meetings feel like they don’t do enough as a meeting. Some meetings join together with other local faith organizations into ecumenical groups that can do things together that would be impossible to accomplish apart.

Earthcare is a growing concern. The environmentally dangerous practice of hydrofracking threatens parts of our yearly meeting. Many meetings have written minutes in support of the banning of this practice, adding to the one written by our yearly meeting.

Meetings inside prisons examine and discuss Quaker faith and practice and use the testimonies to guide them. One incarcerated person said “We are used to living simple lives because of our circumstances. We maintain our integrity by not engaging in harmful or dishonest activities.” One worship group wondered if simplicity might equal utopia. Another concluded that greed is the driving force against equality.

Almost no meetings claimed to have developed new practices. The traditions of Quaker practice are rich and useful and are being relied upon more and more.

Perhaps Community can be seen as an increasingly important testimony. A great number of meetings expressed gratitude for their Quaker community, and for one another. One meeting suggested that perhaps Joy is a new testimony, the source of which is the children in their meeting.

Some Friends experience our time as “a critical time in our history.” Several meetings spoke of the knowledge that there is great suffering in the world. Another meeting perceives it as prideful to think the times we live in are extraordinary.

Conclusion

Our monthly meetings are full of spiritual gifts. We help one another through difficulties. We practice humility in recognizing failures and working to resolve conflicts. We reach out to the community and welcome newcomers. We support each other in our spiritual journeys. We celebrate our joys together. We learn how to carry Quaker practice and the quietness of meeting into our daily lives. We do not know exactly how we will continue to grow and what steps we will take to share the work of the meeting, but we trust that the Way will Open.