

STATE OF THE SOCIETY REPORT 2009

Summary of Monthly Meeting Reports

Friends throughout New York Yearly Meeting expressed their love this year for the Light that shines at the center of each monthly meeting. We praise and celebrate that Light, facing each other in worship and praying always that the community that embraces us be enfolded in the profound reality of God's tender embrace.

As we examine the state of our meetings and of our society, we seek to come together as one body attuned and ever faithful to the will of the Divine. In opening our hearts to truly seeing "what is" and what we are being called to, we acknowledge our limitations in perception and understanding. We need each other to see the whole and to discern God's will.

We know that we are blessed and accompanied on our journey. Yet as human beings and realists we worry about our worship communities. We worry about resources—money and time—and whether we will have enough. We struggle to meet our budgets, striving to keep our expenses down while remaining faithful to our leadings. In many meetings, we see our numbers becoming smaller, our members older, our children fewer.

We hope that others will find us just as so many of us found the Religious Society of Friends—by following a deep yearning for a form of worship that speaks to our hearts. We do not insist that our form of worship is right for everyone, so we are shy about urging others to follow us. We have trouble talking openly about spiritual matters even with each other; how can we impose on outsiders?

When new people come to meeting, the ones who stay tend to be similar to the people who are already there. This is not surprising—like calls to like—but throughout the Yearly Meeting, the idea that we appeal to only one segment of the population is unacceptable. As members of one human family created by Divine Love, we stand ready to welcome anyone who comes to us. Yet most of us find ourselves sitting with white, older, well-educated people who grew up in the middle class. We pray for an opening in the invisible walls of automatic privilege.

These concerns prompted the queries sent out for consideration in writing the State of the Meeting reports. We asked three specific questions concerning meeting finances, ministry to youth, and our experiences with racial issues. We also asked a general question about how we see the Divine Presence shaping our meetings and what the best future could bring. The resulting State of the Meeting reports

are gathered into the State of Society Report, where we consider the spiritual vitality of New York Yearly Meeting.

Finances

The most concrete query was about meeting finances. Most meetings reported that times are tough, but they are making their budgets with a few cutbacks. Meetings without meetinghouses were uniformly in good financial shape, as were those that had a source of income other than contributions—such as rental space, an annual fair, a substantial endowment. Those with heritage meetinghouses to maintain were struggling but generally not in crisis. Overall, prudence and economy have served us well.

A few reports directly addressed the added question of whether their members and attenders feel committed to contribute. Money is hard to talk about, and the need for financial planning can clash painfully with the values of acceptance and privacy. One meeting expressed concern about how a few contributors seemed to carry most of the budget; another meeting has begun to ask for quarterly pledges; yet another struggles to decide whether they should openly discuss the range in size of donations. Meetings with large endowments felt more secure, but asked themselves if their security came at the expense of growth. Is abundance best enjoyed in guarding the nest egg, or in spending it as an act of faith in responding to God's call?

Youth

The most poignant answers came from the query about ministry to youth. With some very bright exceptions, many of our meetings have either no First Day school or a variable population of fewer than five children. Every meeting in this situation expressed sorrow. The “exception” meetings had many children, many projects, and great pleasure in the sound of young voices during and after meeting for worship. Two meetings reported healthy class sizes in the elementary and middle school ages, but no teenagers. Those meetings with no young children but a few teens watch with concern as the teens leave for college. One report wondered if “by the teen years Quaker social values have been learned, but perhaps not the value of worship and the nurture of one's spirit.” On the other hand, the Young Friends in Residence program is greeted happily by every meeting involved.

Meetings report very modest outreach to colleges, even though several meet on college campuses. Two meetings have an active campus ministry, and a few others were in the beginning stages of considering how to approach students. One meeting noted that college is not available to everyone and wondered how to reach out to youth who begin work after high school.

Friends treasure their children. Even in meetings where no child is heard, there are teachers ready every First Day in case one shows up. We know that an active First Day school is critical to bringing in young families. This is an area of concern.

Race

The query about each meeting's experience with race was difficult. A few meetings chose not to respond, saying that the issue was not relevant to them or that they were located in a racially homogeneous area. Some skipped the question, while others listed each instance of a person of color joining or attending. Some mentioned the Underground Railroad History Project; others mentioned their sponsorship of prison meetings, where the diversity of color and situation is profound. Many reported that they formed discussion groups to read *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship* by Vanessa Julye and Donna McDaniel.

Although welcome variations are beginning to appear, the Yearly Meeting remains fairly homogeneous. Different locations face different challenges in becoming more diverse. Many meetings are located in mostly white suburbs but have members who commute to work in more urban, diverse communities. Some meetings are entirely rural; others are in the heart of multiethnic cities. Some meetings have become aware of large nearby immigrant communities. On the strategy of bringing the meeting to the people, two mostly white suburban meetings in New Jersey are working together to start a worship group in a more diverse community located between them. Similarly, some meetings near colleges are considering holding midweek meetings in the evening, when it is easier for college students to attend. If potential new members cannot find us inside our comfort zone, maybe we can venture out to find them.

What Do We Hope To Be?

Of the queries we asked, Friends responded least to the question, "What is the most hopeful vision of your meeting?" This seemed to be the case whether a meeting was large and flourishing or small and struggling. Perhaps it is hard to find the energy to envision the future. Or perhaps the invitation to dream and to listen acutely to where we are being led as a meeting opens up too much, sending us into uncharted territory beyond where we normally go in assessing the state of our society.

Intimations of such a vision named more children, youth and young adults as part of our meetings, efforts at advancement, growth in numbers and in spiritual depth, and deeper engagement in our witness to the world. Friends envisioned greater diversity of all kinds in our meetings, more connection to other meetings and the wider Society

of Friends, and a passion and vitality that encompasses worship, community, outreach and political activism.

As we strive to remain open and faithful to growing in the Light, there remains in every meeting the sweetness of the dream of love, the circle that hums with its own holy energy. “We have something very precious here,” writes one meeting. “Our meeting is small but vibrant,” says another. “We [hear] the longing for a community that brings out the best in each of us, for a welcoming, vibrant spiritual center.” “We are feeling the Spirit moving in our community. We are drawing others to us.” “We sense a yearning in the world today which Quakerism can help fulfill.”

We honor and value the treasure we have found, faithfully meeting each First Day, striving to be wise stewards of our resources and to live love actively amongst ourselves and beyond the meeting room. We enjoy the quiet that allows the Light to shine through without interference. Yet we discover again and again that it is not quiet but adversity that stimulates life. Very few meetings speak with the passion and excitement of the prison worship groups, where quiet is rare and adversity the daily fare. And more than one meeting has thanked God for the gift of an activating concern that impelled the meeting to undertake a process of discernment together. It may be the decision to build or renovate or move, or the “dragon” of theological differences, or even the heartbreaking loss of a key member. It is not our safety, but our problems that will save us.

It was said in the Spring Meeting for Discernment that we do not worship silence or buildings, but that both can be the occasion for the Spirit’s kindling. So can the challenges we face and have faced for a long time: maintaining healthy finances, reaching out to young families and children, and opening our worship to those who live in a history we have not shared. The steps we take may seem small, but every challenge that disturbs our comfort opens us to growth. We thank God for our challenges and our growth, and for continued blessings as we journey on.