

## State of Society Report

*Between January and April 2018, 56/73 (77%) of New York Yearly Meeting monthly meetings submitted State of Meeting reports. 8/10 (80%) of prison worship groups submitted reports. 49/63 (78%) of monthly meetings (excluding prison worship groups) completed a ten-question survey distributed by the State of Society Committee. All quotations and data represented in the narrative below come from submitted reports and the results of that survey. Since not all Meetings responded to the survey, any percentages included in the report are approximations rather than exact figures.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Present with one another in worship, discernment, witness, and fellowship, Friends across New York Yearly Meeting described the 2017-2018 year as one in which the Spirit flowed. Rich connections continue to enliven and enrich us, to show us the way while we wrestle with internal struggles, concerns about the state of our nation, violence around the world, and climate change. Many of our meetings are small or shrinking. 61% of meetings have fewer than 40 members, 47% have fewer than ten people attending meeting for worship, and 32% have lost members over the last year. Yet, “we find strength in each other even as we are challenged by our diminishment and face the fears of our unknown future as a meeting.” Other meetings are large or growing. 39% of meetings have greater than 40 members, 16% have greater than 25 people attending meeting for worship, and 23% have increased their membership over the last year. One meeting shared, “We have been blessed this year to hear a letter requesting membership (either first or second reading) at eight of eleven meetings for worship with a concern for business.” Indeed, whatever the meeting size and circumstances, the commitment we make to one another to gather in worship to find a way forward is the core of our Quaker faith and practice.

Meetings posed rich questions for themselves, and perhaps in turn for Quakers everywhere:

- Can we reclaim the discipline of speaking truth with love to each other—and to the world?
- Are we making Friends’ testimonies a way of life?
- What would it look like to be a radical spiritual community?
- Is it possible for us...to push back against overstimulation—to keep the Sabbath, to make room every day for the Holy? Can we find a way to do this as individuals and as a community?
- How has the meeting changed me? Are there ways we would like the meeting to change us?
- What is the shadow side of our Light?
- What is experiencing the Spirit?
- How do we keep the channels of Love and Truth alive?
- Has the State of Society report become a “redundant process” ...“new ways to say the same thing”?

Briefly or in more detail, each state of the meeting report shares wisdom from a collective journey across the year, revealing strong and consistent themes throughout our yearly meeting. Truth is illuminated and elevated by elders, members and attenders, newcomers and children, and we see that “Truth is spoken by both experienced and inexperienced Friends. We need only to listen.”

Many Meetings experience **worship** as strong, vital, and powerful, the primary well

from which we, as individuals and as a community, draw our vision and sustain our integrity. While 38% of our meetings report that ministry is rare with fewer than two messages per week, there is a “sense of increased nurture and sustenance, depth in a time of emotional stress in the country, and interest to offer spiritual sanctuary to all who attend.” “Our world cries out for all the loving creative energy we can muster. Our coming together regularly in worship helps us not be paralyzed but meet each day with gratitude and openness to possibilities.” “Everything is suspended as we sit quietly and wait—except for the fire in the woodstove and the Light.” “Meetings for worship are an opportunity for us to feel human in a de-humanizing world.”

“We listen for the wisdom of the Inner Light, experience the Holy Spirit, pay attention to the spoken ministry of others and deliver our own vocal ministry.” Sometimes “the unwillingness to break the silence” suggests that the spoken ministry arises from an inward prompting of “the genuine spirit of prophecy.” “We do not pull and tug at each other’s beliefs—or lack of them. We trust the power of silent worship to unite us.” “The worship silence can challenge us to be the person we want to be and to come to actions led from the voice of love.” “I sit in silence here, so I can go out and be a loud voice for justice.”

**Witness and service**, activism, and interfaith partnerships are important to us, both communally and as individual Friends. One meeting noted that the state of the world in the present times “prompted many of us to become more visible as Quakers;” and another embraced the call to “witness to others in love and to not surrender to our fears.” “We like how our meeting takes collective action to heal the world but also helps us in our own individual efforts.” Friends provide unwavering leadership to unpack and dismantle racism in our history and practice. “We call on Friends to look at how white privilege and European-American culture have been baked into the history and structure of Quakerism.” Friends across the yearly meeting also stay busy with personal and shared reading, training, speaking out, engagement with community partners, and activism in the wider community. We continue with regular peace vigils, preparing and serving meals for the hungry, support for refugees, homeless shelters, film/discussion programs open to the community, prison visitation, AVP, and active participation in a wide variety of local and statewide issues including prison reform. “We were deeply encouraged by so many people coming on board for the solitary housing unit display” hosted at the local county fair, and “how many members of the public we engaged in dialogue there.” Our witness in the world is a vehicle for spreading God’s love and sharing the Truth we have discovered.

Yet there is tension for some of us as well. We wonder how to faithfully balance the communal leadings of our meetings and the strong leadings of individuals. We wonder how to sustain myriad projects and events beyond the meetinghouse walls while sustaining ourselves as a community. We wonder if our attention to social justice distracts us from attending to our members and attenders. “Meaningful witness became hesitant at a time when spiritual sustenance was most needed and when attendance was declining.” “We hope to obsess less over news headlines and to focus instead on critical issues.” “We strive to anchor the ‘doing’ of service’ in the deep ‘being’ that changes even our neurons in the direction of compassion, trust, and service.” We trust we are moving in the right direction and recognize that the path is not always easy.

**Outreach** is a focus for many meetings, informed by a desire for growth and a more vibrant, inclusive, diverse community in worship and business. We know and are continuing to discover the value of diverse opinions and we seek to enrich the presence of Friends in a changing world. While in past years we have discussed hypothetical ambitions for outreach and griped about the challenges to accomplish it, we have shifted our tone this year, instead focusing on the concrete and specific actions we are taking to

make our presence known and invite people in. Outreach is more comfortable for some than for others, and what outreach looks like varies based on meeting size and location, including geographic “apartness” for those who travel some distance to their meeting. However, we seem more confident and optimistic in our efforts, potentially as a result of the newly launched Outreach Working Group which serves to “make outreach a thoughtful, joyful, ongoing practice in every Quaker meeting, ultimately raising the visibility and awareness of Quakers and the message we bring to the world.” We sense that they are succeeding.

“Who are we as a faith community, family and how can the meeting house serve our needs? Who are we to our neighbors? Who are we to seekers who cross our threshold?” How do we visibly create “a place of more walking together than holding to a dogma?” “We endeavor to teach Friends’ practice and to be as transparent as possible in our work as we try to learn from those who join us in worship and community.” “We are optimistic that we are both ‘doing the right things’ and ‘doing things right,’ but we know that we now need results in the coming year to show that the meeting is growing, that the quality of our worship is growing, and that the service we offer to the world is making a difference.”

We also seem to be shifting and growing in our capacity to recognize and address **conflict**. While in past years we have noted aversion to or outright ignoring of the conflicts simmering in our midst, many of us have learned how to move from positions of powerlessness and fear to strategies focused on peaceful resolution, transforming power, and community. We know that when left unresolved, conflict takes away from our ability to grow and connect with Spirit, and while we still have work to do, we are more open about naming the reality of conflicts and misunderstandings that have separated members from a meeting and from one another. Certainly, the work of the Committee on Conflict Transformation is aiding us in our journey by providing tools, resources, and support. “We hope and feel obligated for the healing outcome of open discussions and new revelations.”

Meetings large and small acknowledge that being prepared for **First Day School, children, and families** is sometimes a burden. However, we note that our increased labors and attention in this area often brings people together and creates a bright spot in the life of our communities. 34% of our meetings offer First Day School every week for elementary-aged children and 14% are prepared to offer First Day School if children attend. We are growing in our ability to welcome and value children’s voices in meeting activities, including the writing of the state of meeting reports. We are also growing in our sensitivity to the challenges facing our families and parents. There is much gratitude expressed throughout NYYM for the guidance and resources offered by Melinda Wenner-Bradley to enrich First Day School and involve children in worship and meeting life. At the same time, 34% of our meetings do not have any children or families in attendance, and only 13% offer programs, First Day School, or engagement opportunities for high schoolers or young adults. While there is much to celebrate in terms of increased inclusion, as a yearly meeting we have work to do in this area.

We are **experimenting with and examining our structures** for committees, business meetings, and even our meetings for worship, recognizing that our processes must sometimes evolve to make room for or better illuminate God and Truth. One meeting wonders how to “support our differences without feeling we homogenize into an even keel, middle of the road, steadily plodding-in-the ordinary meeting?” We offer new ways to engage and encourage participation and understanding by members and attenders including creating a flow from worship into meeting for business, holding a meeting for committee clerks one week prior to meeting for business, distributing agendas and other documents in advance of meetings to allow for fuller discernment,

allowing both members and attenders to break meeting, and introducing queries or readings into meeting for worship. One meeting shared: “as a small meeting, we cannot maintain a committee structure. Having come to accept this as a strength, rather than a limitation, we are now able to conduct Spirit-led, worshipful business together.” Another meeting described a well-functioning “Upreach Committee” that combines “advancement, peace and social concerns, and intergenerational fellowship.” Yet another wrote that “rotating leadership for adult Religious Education broadened participation.” We are actively discussing and navigating challenges around how to embrace technology, effectively use websites, and employ social media. While there is still tension and some resistance to change, we are finding that our experimentation and deep listening help reduce committees’ and individuals’ sense of being over-stretched, and further contribute to improved inclusivity and productivity in our meetings and yearly meeting. “In trusting in Spirit, we are letting go of fear, realizing that it also a means letting go of certainty.”

While many of our meetings and worship groups experience fragility and fear of the future, together this year’s state of meeting reports tell more of a story of continuing revelation, openness to change, optimism, and hope. “A year that began with a sense of crisis and [seemingly] dwindling resources [of time and energy] has ended with a deeper, richer sense of community and mutual trust.” We are preparing people to participate and engage at deeper levels. We are singing, making music, and creating art. We are becoming more aware of and attempting to limit our implicit expectations of people. We are sharing responsibility for the joy and tension of supporting individuals in their leadings. “The darkness comes in the human form of misunderstandings in which we listen more closely to our own voices than to the voice of the Holy Spirit working among us.” We are working on it by reaching out and reaching in, growing up and centering down, honoring the past and looking toward the future. “Just as the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi nearly two thousand years ago, we have not yet reached perfection in the Lord, but we move ever forward to reach that mark and attain that goal.” From our small corner of Quakerdom, New York Yearly Meeting shares praise, blessings, wisdom, and gratitude with each other and the wider world.

—*Marissa Badgley*