

Report on Meeting for Discernment at Summer Sessions 2016

It is clear to the Steering Committee that meetings for discernment, both at summer sessions and at the winter event, are highly valued by many Friends as opportunities for deep spiritual sharing without the encumbrance of time limits such as are now the norm at Sunday morning worship meetings throughout our society. The experience of extended worship was integral to the experience of Friends of centuries past, but has otherwise been largely lost to our society. Meetings for Discernment is recapturing that valuable experience.

We do not read from messages shared in the two extended worship times, but the words of some of the participants, shared in the reflection session at the end of the day, which itself was deeply moving and rewarding, will serve best to express what transpired throughout the day for the participants.

- ...at this past set of meetings for discernment at summer sessions, I found this morning and this afternoon quite grounding and invigorating.
- ...my fondness for the meetings for discernment. I think this innovation was brilliant. We actually aren't guided by the tyranny of the clock that rules our monthly meeting... Grateful to whoever thought it up.
- This is a radically different experience.
- It seems to me that we've learned how to do the meetings for discernment. In the early days it was really painful - almost fighting for airtime. Today, particularly in the afternoon there was a spaciousness that was really important.
- We've learned how to do this. I think we can bring more people into it now that we're so much better at it.
- It opened up a whole different world to me.
- These people are committed to deeper worship.... I want everybody to be a part of this as a community worship, I wonder how to get that. I wonder whether the people on the MfD steering committee and clerks could feel how much we appreciated the work you did. ... The uniqueness of this day and the continuity with the past. And I wonder if I'm alone in finding it hard to show my appreciation in the whole YM for what they did.
- I wonder what there is for us as a whole body, to learn from the experience of the meetings for discernment. I wonder what there is for us to learn about how we might teach our young people our practice of worship.

While the experience at both sessions – all three, in reality – was deep and a special kind of Quaker sharing, there were concerns that the Steering Committee is laboring over.

The morning session brought many friends; the auditorium was as full as some business sessions. Unfortunately, only an hour and a half was scheduled by Sessions Committee, which contends with multiple requests. It was far less time than is optimum. The afternoon session, scheduled for two hours and fifteen minutes, was a much better

length, but being after lunch, it occurred when many people feel a need for rest. It is clear that the length of the sessions would optimally be reversed, although the afternoon session was also highly successful despite a long period of silent worship. In addition, far fewer Friends participated in the afternoon session because it was scheduled in conflict with interest groups, and quite a few Friends were distressed by the conflict, especially if they felt they had to be a part of a given interest group for reasons of a specific commitment.

The steering committee is also laboring over the nature of the queries, which were extensive and focused, leading some Friends to feel restricted. A related concern that the committee will labor over is that the original concept of the Meetings for Discernment was to “share joys and concerns from their monthly meetings, and sometimes personal leadings.” Do we wish to consider returning to that focus, or continuing in the direction we have found ourselves at this point in time, some eight years or so since the inception of our holy experiment?

The committee is pleased to be able to bring the opportunity for shared extended worship to Friends from throughout the Yearly Meeting, both to summer sessions and to the regions, where it serves to bring primarily regional Friends together in a highly mutually supportive spiritual experience.

We commend meetings for discernment to Friends everywhere. The committee welcomes requests at any time from regions and local meetings to serve as host for the winter sessions.

Meetings for Discernment Steering Committee
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