

NYYM State of Society Report 2016

Queries for 2016:

What is the spiritual condition of your Meeting? What is the spiritual condition of your committee? What is the spiritual condition of New York Yearly Meeting?

We Are Here

When terror and war shook our world, when our brothers and sisters fled persecution and turmoil abroad, when tragedy struck our local communities, New York Yearly Meeting Friends were there. When our international leaders came together around climate change, when the Supreme Court affirmed same-sex marriage, when our people stood up against hate and injustice, New York Yearly Meeting Friends were there. When our federal systems failed the most vulnerable among us, when human rights were compromised, when schools and streets and places of business were soiled with blood and tears, New York Yearly Meeting Friends were there. We were there and we are here. And in a year so marred by political, environmental, and social tumult, we remain faithfully present. We will not go away.

With 87% of Monthly Meetings and 18 committees responding, this year's meeting and committee reports tell the story of this faithful presence. We are here. We are optimistic, joyful, grateful, and impassioned. Though our numbers are often smaller than we would like, our worship is rich and our communities are strong. Though many of us feel the pain of loss and the challenges associated with aging, there is a real sense that our meetings and Yearly Meeting will go on into the future. One report used the metaphor of a tree that has roots in the past and branches reaching out to the future: though its leaves fall away, new leaves grow. Though we sometimes mourn what once was, we are getting better at listening and responding to that which currently is and who we are now. We recognize that when we let go, the Spirit changes; when we come together in God's presence, it is no longer about treading water but instead finding ways to swim. We celebrate the short distances we have swum together this year and also the longer journeys yet to come. We are here.

Friends consistently report that faith and community help meetings and committees face challenges with joy. We speak of healing, compassion, and kindness, recognizing that it is more often Spirit that brings us together rather than a physical setting. We speak of acceptance and affirmation, of supporting each other in times of stress and strengthening our spiritual connectedness through Quaker values like non-violence, social justice, speaking Truth, and environmental stewardship. We feel our meetings are spiritual families, oases of peace, havens for spirit and body, and safe places to share joys and concerns. Likewise, our committees speak of being a part of something greater, of faithful service and dedication despite a frequent shortage of people to perform the work. Grounded by passionate witness and by desires to push us toward sustainability and a more just world, we embrace our commitment to the Yearly Meeting's priorities and to making our Yearly Meeting and world a better place. We are here.

Meeting for Worship is most frequently described as deeply enriching. It is a time to be "grounded in silence," to "grow in spirit," to commit ourselves to a "great sense of power and harmony with the Divine." At the same time, more than a third of our meetings express concerns over a lack of vocal ministry, many of us noting a delicate balance between a love of deep silence and a desire to hear and share vocal ministry. Though some meetings are concerned with a lack of spiritual depth in ministry, others are deeply moved by spirit-led messages when they occur. The common thread is that our worship brings us together despite our many differences in faith, understanding, and belief. Seekers are warmly welcomed as Friends offer hospitality, spiritual renewal and respite from worldly cares. Especially in our worship, we are here.

This year perhaps more than in past years, we have made a concerted effort to create opportunities for additional worship and fellowship beyond Meeting for Worship on Sundays. Almost half of our meetings report a rise in after-meeting and midweek discussions on social and spiritual topics, in addition to increased openings for Bible study, worship-sharing, pot luck meals, hymn singing, spiritual mentorship, community service, and Yearly Meeting-led workshops. Meetings also share that their members and attenders are actively involved in workshops outside of the Meeting, serving on Yearly Meeting and other committees, participating in AVP, ARCH, FLGC and prison witness work, and attending community events such as interfaith gatherings, vigils, parades, film festivals, and fairs. Our General Secretary recently noted that he has never seen so much going on and while this “busyness” sometimes makes it difficult for us to do everything we wish to, there is a new and expectant energy circulating among us. We seem to be catching enthusiasm from each other and it is a blessing. We are here and as one Meeting report put it, “[We]...hopefully, bring light to the troubled world.”

Many of our meetings and committees are concerned about diminishing numbers, aging membership, decreasing energy of long-time members, and travel distance for Friends. However, though our concerns are commonly shared, it is clear that our meetings and committees find themselves in starkly different places in terms of growth, satisfaction, and priorities. While 11 percent of our meetings reported decreased membership this past year, another 10 percent reported increased membership. While 15 percent of meetings celebrated the arrival of younger F/friends, families, new attenders, and visitors, more than 15 percent of us noted feelings of isolation, fragmentation, and the overburdening of a small membership with too many responsibilities. More than 15 percent of our meetings spoke of the attention given to pastoral care for aging members who can no longer drive or, in some cases, attend Meeting at all. These Meetings often keenly feel the loss of these experienced Friends and are increasingly concerned for the future. On the other hand, optimism runs deep in more than 20 percent of reports, with increasing attention paid to children, youth, young adults, and families. In this same vein, 10 percent of meetings remarked on the vitality of First Day School, the activity of young families and the joy in hearing the voices of children, while 10 percent more remarked that they do not have enough children to hold regular First Day School. In times of growth, death, and stagnation, we are here.

Similar tensions exist when we consider our structures and physical spaces. With regard to Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business, some meetings report that business processes are “rightly led” and efficient, while others find themselves avoiding difficult issues and concerned that only a small number of Friends regularly attend Business Meeting. While some Meetings are having difficulty financially maintaining meetinghouses, they see the need for upkeep as an opportunity for workdays that raise the spirit of the Meeting community and make the “sacred space” more welcoming. Others are questioning whether the time and expense needed are diminishing their ability to serve the spiritual and social needs of members. Our successes and challenges are sometimes vastly different but we are all still here.

On the Yearly Meeting committee level, we hear of passionate witness work and the intense presence of spirit, high quality clerking and increased cross-committee exposure. We hear a resounding commitment to the Yearly Meeting’s Leadings and Priorities, in addition to worries about how those priorities will affect work moving forward. More than half of the committees with whom we spoke expressed that there are not enough people for the work at hand, though a few reported vibrant and growing membership. Many committees struggle with finding face-time for meetings and more than a few feel that they are missing key representation from Yearly Meeting regions and age groups. A few clerks testified to their exhaustion and dwindling energy, while others seem to be bursting with vitality and momentum. In our energy and in our weariness, we are here.

Even as we applaud our seemingly boundless support of one other, we wonder what we can do to better support those of us who encounter difficulty. Everyone on their spiritual journey needs someone to walk with them, and as a society we continue to struggle in our efforts to bring in, engage, and keep our new and younger attenders. We are forced to ask ourselves difficult questions. How can a person be involved even if they are not serving on a committee? How do we give people the language to talk about their experiences of God? How do we create authentic opportunities for people to share these experiences? How do others know what is going on in our individual corners? How do we invite people into our corners when we see them gazing in our general direction? How do we find the delicate balance between doing and being? How do we simultaneously embrace and reconcile widely divergent views among both members and attenders?

In our questioning, discernment, and seeking together, we are here.

Our differing conditions, approaches, and priorities make it difficult to discern a true and universal state of our society. Yet, on the whole, we are guided by Spirit and encouraged by the love that we feel within and without our meetinghouse walls. We embrace the spiritual presence of those who have worshiped among us but are no longer here. We recognize our diversity of beliefs, language, and faith and are grateful for the myriad spiritual gifts in our midst. We rejoice in a sense of renewal and expectation that stands in wonderful juxtaposition with the doubts, fears, and worries of our past. We are here and we will remain faithfully present. Accompanied by God and Truth and Light and Love, we will not go away.