

STATE OF THE SOCIETY REPORT 2010

Summary of Monthly Meeting Reports

In early 2011, the constituent meetings and gatherings of New York Yearly Meeting wrote to describe the vitality of their faith communities during 2010. Their writing was guided by these queries:

Meetings are living bodies and thus experience cycles of growth and dormancy. What new growth do you greet in your meeting? What losses do you mourn?

Many meetings struggle with issues of the world such as racism, class inequality, and discrimination by sexual orientation. With what issues does your meeting struggle? How does your meeting labor with difficult issues?

Friends reported vitality and even excitement across the Yearly Meeting. A theme emerges in the State of the Meeting reports: that meetings are vital when they make hard decisions together. This was true in meetings deciding to invest in new or improved physical space. It was also true in meetings working through difficult conflict within their communities. In both situations, the meeting body was required to discern something new together—to put aside old expectations and seek new uses of Quaker process—which means, to rely more purely on the strength and guidance of the Light.

As always, some meetings worry about losing members and some rejoice in new members. We continue to worry about homogeneity and age—we value greater diversity and wish for energetic youth. A few meetings and worship groups have been laid down. Some meetings suffered the death of elder members who had been anchors in their communities. Other meetings reported gains in membership that made up for their losses, and still others reported that their lists of members, attenders, and even First Day school classes were growing.

Throughout the Yearly Meeting, extraordinary individuals followed leadings that took them into innovative community projects, heroic acts of caring, or witness that led to prison. These individuals were nurtured by their meetings, which were nurtured in turn by the energy of each individual. State of the Meeting reports cite these accomplishments—and they are many. Friends across the Yearly Meeting witnessed against racism, torture, bullying, war, immigration policies, and environmental assaults such as hydrofracking.

But it is what a meeting does as a whole that seems to give

it experiential vitality. As a whole, meetings mourn the loss of members and attenders who were central to meeting life. As a whole, meetings face crises such as domestic violence in a meeting family, unexpected loss of meeting space, or the death of a beloved teenager. And it is as a whole that meetings celebrate weddings, new members, intergenerational worship, and the opening of a new room for worship.

When a meeting as a whole has to make a hard decision, spiritual and personal struggle can result. The decision to spend money on new meeting space, particularly during a time when money is not in abundance, impels meetings to reconsider their goals and their strength. An urgent crisis such as domestic violence in a meeting family tests members' ability to act together in an effective and humane way. Decisions about spiritual values and social concerns take a more variable path. For example, some meetings reached consensus on same-gender marriage only after years of discussion; other meetings seemed to achieve it without much friction at all.

When Friends disagree and yet must decide on a specific action, we have many resources for struggle. It is wonderful to read of meetings deploying one resource after another until a given crisis is resolved. Quaker practice gives us the tools of clearness committees, study groups, threshing sessions, and the guidance of the meeting's Ministry and Counsel. We turn to neighboring meetings for help, or meetings far away who face a similar situation, or we seek the counsel of yearly meeting elders. The Friends General Conference Traveling Ministries and the Alternatives to Violence Project also offer guidance. When a meeting is divided, our faith advises us to practice patience and waiting, setting aside the problem until the Spirit has done its work. As one meeting writes, "We work to deepen our will to listen and wait; we yearn for the guidance of Spirit; we pray for the power to follow our leadings."

With initial struggle but eventual celebration, Meetings have built new spaces, repaired and improved older ones, and increased their accessibility. Some meetings find themselves in neighborhoods that have different demographics than most of the meeting's members. Recognizing this as a challenge and an opportunity, meetings have held open discussion groups, public forums, and film series to form stronger relationships with their surrounding communities. Meetings have made statements of conscience about local issues, always with the goal of increasing peace and social justice.

The decision to spend money together has shed new light on the abiding issue of economic class. However homogeneous we may appear to be, NYYM members inhabit many different financial situations. For some meetings, class differences arose uncomfortably in the process of raising money and servicing debt. Speaking out loud about these issues was not only practical but eventually healing. Other meetings became aware that some of their members were in acute financial need and that meeting funds could be directed to people within the meeting as meaningfully as to charities outside it.

Several meetings identified money and the issue of class as an overriding concern that unites many other social issues. New York Yearly Meeting, along with most of North America, is outside the world's majority of Quakers, who are primarily people of color who survive on little money. This difference is an opportunity for growth and new understanding of how we are called to treat each other. Within the Yearly Meeting, the prison meetings are closest to the issue of class simply because imprisonment forces each person into a single low class. Although the prison meetings are tiny and under constant stress, they also appear to be among some of the most vital, most exciting meetings in the Yearly Meeting community.

Money is not our only unequal resource—personal time is another. Many meetings reported a decline in energy and involvement in committees, particularly outside of a core group of elders. Several meetings began looking at their committee structure to simplify decisionmaking and reduce everyone's expense of time. One meeting has been experimenting with the structure of business meeting itself, trying out a "round table" approach in which each person is asked what they bring to the meeting. This has led to a closer and stronger community. They also changed their Nominations Committee to a "Gifts and Leadings" committee that is more focused on identifying people's gifts instead of "guilting" them into service. Finally, they scheduled one Sunday with a series of meetings based on committees' work and open to all. Much work was accomplished, and new ideas and energy flowed forth.

Several meetings spoke of a yearning to be called, to be unified as they were at some point in the past "in a single project which was experienced as Spirit-led." Our struggles to discern and decide are part of listening for that call. We are not quiet for the sake of quiet itself, but to better hear that of God within. George Fox urged us not just to take care of each other, but to

"stand and live in the same power and Spirit that the prophets and apostles were in." We cherish our monthly meetings, which provide us with comfort and community, but it may be discomfort that moves us to seek wider justice, greater environmental health, and a larger people to be gathered.

One meeting wrote: "As is true of all living bodies, our membership waxes and wanes, and the collective energy of individuals grows and lies dormant, always, it seems, to grow again like the new shoot emerging each year from the bulb. But the spiritual center of our meeting—the 'divine'—is constant."