

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report, 2000

Friendships, spiritual and otherwise, have continued to expand and deepen at Patapsco Meeting this year. Our sense of the Divine has been stretched and enlivened through our corporate worship with all ages and through our earnest searching for the truth within each member of this spiritual community. The Meeting has begun to realize the value of the honored Quaker tradition of the threshing session.

Once freed from the expectation that all views on a subject must be considered at monthly Meeting for Business, we immersed ourselves in sharing and listening to each individual's beliefs and concerns on such matters as same gender marriage (and marriage in general), having children in the Meeting for Worship, and considering a proposal to buy, build or rent a full-time meetinghouse facility. The result in all cases has been to increase our tender regard for one another, even when our views conflict.

The Meetings for Worship are well balanced in terms of spoken messages and silent worshipping. Messages often focus on personal experiences Friends have had, and may then be related to the speakers' spiritual journey, Quaker thought, or Biblical passages. Often, the Meeting ends with people feeling that they have experienced a gathered Meeting for Worship. Differing individuals speak on any particular Sunday, but some people speak more than others, and some almost never speak. The Meeting needs to find ways to encourage non-speakers to feel comfortable speaking if they have messages to share.

The year has seen changes in some of our regular gatherings. The monthly book discussion group was laid down, but with an eye toward re-forming it in another way in the future, so as to sustain interest over a long period of time. The monthly Meeting for Healing experienced a period of declining attendance, so leaders Elizabeth Saria and Phyllis Keenan responded by developing a theme for each session, announced well in advance. Thus far, the themes have included dealing with loss and dealing with life changes. This has renewed interest in this second-Sunday group where Friends are sharing their personal struggles and providing spiritual support. Finally, the bi-monthly Bible study group was laid down.

The Meeting provided support and discernment to several individuals within the Meeting this year through the use of clearness committees. Composed of three to six members each, the committees addressed such varied issues as spiritual leadings, healthcare decisions for family members, and personal support for life changes. Friendly Bunches have continued to re-form and meet under the continued organization of Elizabeth Saria and Special Friendships between adults and assigned children have continued to flourish. Spiritual friendship groups and pairs have also continued to meet, drawing more of the membership into spiritual community through journaling.

The establishment of an Advancement and Outreach committee has made a significant impact on the welcoming of newcomers and their introduction to Quakerism. This inaugural group has provided a display rack filled with literature, organized the greeting of visitors, purchased portable Quaker Meeting signs for use on Sunday mornings and focused our attention on the need to effectively teach attenders about Quakerism.

The Ad Hoc Peace and Social Justice Committee initiated a plan for the Meeting to prepare and deliver a meal for 12 men at a local homeless shelter on a monthly basis. After an initial 6-month commitment, the Meeting agreed to continue this work. Typically, a group of three to four households meets on a Sunday afternoon at someone's home and jointly prepares the meal, including the participation of any children present. The meal is then delivered to the shelter in time for Sunday evening dinner. Identifying a sustainable, local, intergenerational project for the Meeting has been a

process of several years and it is with great appreciation and joy that participants meet together to do this work.

Longtime peace activist, Emma Byrne, nominated by the Meeting, was selected as Howard County's Volunteer of the Year for her work in numerous organizations. Jean Leslie tirelessly compiled the requisite documentation and Emma was recognized both at the county and state level, culminating in a recognition dinner in Annapolis.

Late August brought members of Patapsco to Centennial Park, the site of the third annual summer picnic, to share a meal, games and good weather. The children especially enjoyed whiffle ball, relying on the devoted pitching of Tom Byrne, and a twilight hike, led by John Buck. The month also brought a week-long Vacation Bible School sponsored by the Ad Hoc School Committee, which earlier had determined that it was not led to establish a Quaker school. Searching for a curriculum that would speak to all Quaker families was a challenge that resulted in the committee developing its own program for the 14 children who attended. Following this event, the committee was laid down, having resolved a major question and provided a useful service.

On a warm September weekend the Meeting held a retreat at Mt. Hebron House. Participants found themselves enriched and renewed through a deepening of our connections with each other, the natural world and the Divine. The gathering was launched on Friday evening with spiritual journal sharing and ice cream sundaes. The following day included sessions on simple living, blessed community, leadings and meditation, as well as an all-ages nature walk. The children baked five varieties of bread which was then used in a hands-on hunger exercise wherein groups were formed representing the continents of the world and the relative food supply. A catered lunch served to satisfy even those representing the poorest areas of the globe. The evening ended with live Celtic music, followed by line dancing. We appreciated the support of several Friends from nearby Meetings who assisted our efforts. The Sandy Spring Young Friends' facilitation of the children's program was especially appreciated. Overall there was a sense of sharing and helpfulness as Friends pitched in to help each other supporting the work of the planning committee and group leaders.

The Quaker Heron, our Meeting newsletter which is published quarterly and edited by Diane Reynolds, has become a vehicle for members to share their spiritual beliefs and questions, with articles on a specific theme solicited for each issue. This has been a wonderful way for members to clarify their own attitudes and thoughts, to share within our community and to reach out to occasional attenders. To date, topics have included community, peace, simplicity and equality.

Christmas was recognized by First Day Students with the production of a play in December, written by Ramona Buck, "The Children's Meeting." The energetic performance of the king's soldiers was most impressive, as was the quiet line, "God is love," from two-year-old Scully Wilhelm. Christmas Eve provided a half-hour of silent worship at the end of a busy weekend, followed by carol singing and too many cookies.

The Meeting welcomed Sam Stayton as a new member, and joyfully celebrated the Girbach family's transfer of membership. The number of attenders has also increased, so that extra chairs are increasingly needed to accommodate the worshippers on First Day. First Day School has grown with the addition of several new families. Like many Quaker Meetings, we struggle with how to "teach" Quakerism to children and how to incorporate them into worship while preserving the silence necessary for a deep connection with God. Adults are finding that they are challenged to examine how their own behavior affects the worshipful silence. Newcomers are finding Patapsco on the internet, from other area Meetings and some are returning who attended the Columbia worship group two decades ago.

Overall, this has been a period for the Meeting to develop our use of committees, to sort out what our Meeting does well and what activities we can sustain on a regular basis, and incorporating a steady trickle of newcomers. As the new year dawns, the Meeting is planning to host Quarterly Meeting for the first time and is looking for ways to increase our understanding of Quaker process and our experience of the Divine.