

“Friends, How has the Spirit moved among you since we last met?”

A Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2004

Patapsco Friends, both individually and collectively, listened for the Spirit in our worship, in our business, in our activities and in our lives. While we have not always been successful we can point to a Spirit-led growth in many aspects of our meeting.

Early in the year three Friends joined together to share leadership in teaching Quakerism 101. That series was well attended, and Friends appreciated more fully the spiritual depth of worship sharing. In part as a result of these sessions two Attenders found both time and the financial support of the meeting to continue their search by attending a short weekend retreat at Pendle Hill on Quakerism.

An offering for sale of the original Quaker Meeting House in Ellicott City led to a serious testing of how the Meeting would handle a potentially divisive issue. Our decision was to focus on the spiritual questions that this opportunity raises for us individually and as a meeting. In that worship sharing we explicitly considered several questions: How do I listen to others when their position differs sharply from my own? Do I allow that all are seeking God’s will as faithfully as I? At the same time, how do I listen for the common ground that unites us and for the “third way” that harmonizes viewpoints we perceive to be in disharmony. Do we trust in each other to both share our thoughts with love and to hear each other with love? Do we trust in each other to embrace the diversity of perspectives among us? Do we seek unity among that diversity?

While we did not find unity as a Meeting to offer for the property, the process of worship sharing on the topic was very meaningful and reaffirmed our commitment to act only as we are lead by the Spirit.

The Spring and Summer saw a continuing series of ‘Meetings for Leadings’: a worship sharing group concerned with the general nature of Leadings, as well as the particular spiritual leadings of individuals. The sense of these meetings that there are common elements to all of our struggles with spiritual discernment led to moments of deep sharing.

In May we had an opportunity to support those in the meeting with a concern for Friends in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. Adrien Niyongabo, African coordinator of the Friends Peace Teams Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Project, and Gini Floyd, who celebrated her 84th birthday in Kenya while facilitating AVP workshops, spoke to us at a fundraising dinner about the vital work being done by Friends in this troubled region.

Patapsco Friends also hosted the Chesapeake Quarterly Meeting in June. Here again our concern to present a spiritually meaningful program led us to invite Tony Prete, a student and teacher of the Bible, to present two seminars on the Psalms. We learned there not only about the pattern or style of the Psalms, but also how intimate was the relationship between the writers and their God.

In Business Meeting we reaffirmed our intent not only to subsidize Friends to attend camps, conferences, retreats and meetings, but also to actively ask Friends to represent the Meeting. The spiritual growth of the Meeting depends on active seeking and participation of our members not only in the meeting activities, but also in the wider Quaker community. Our affirmation led us to send Friends to camp, to the Center for Talented Youth summer program, to Pendle Hill retreats, to Baltimore Yearly Meeting, and to FCNL’s annual meeting. Friends at Patapsco have volunteered for a number of BYM committees and have become active in the wider community.

In the Autumn, following on the Meeting for Leadings, a Patapsco Friend led us in a series of six intense sessions on 'Sacred Spaces'. Focusing on prayer and other means of connecting with the divine, these again were patterned on Quaker worship sharing. These special opportunities for worship sharing were held against a background of more on-going activities: Bible Study was held consistently throughout the year, and 'Friendly Bunches' were also active.

We are grateful that our spiritual community includes people of many ages, both young and old. The children are important participants in our Meeting. Through their silent but lively eyes during the first fifteen minutes of Meeting, their exuberance at simple meals, their sweet singing of Quaker songs wafting into the Meeting after they leave, their eagerness to put up and take down the welcome signs, their down to earth discussions during First Day School, they exhibit hope, energy and a burst of reality for the rest of us. In addition to coming to Meeting, a number of them have become dedicated Quaker campers.

Planning and implementing a program for First Day School cannot be done 'out of the Spirit', and our teachers are in many ways our Spiritual leaders. Most importantly for growing our maturing Meeting, our Middle School young people are helping to teach the younger children in First Day School.

Sensing a sincere interest among our Attenders on the question of membership, Ministry and Care organized a series of worship sharing meetings based on readings from the Pendle Hill pamphlet "Members One of Another" by Thomas Gates.

Some Friends felt that our brief consideration of the Queries and Advices for a few moments before the business of Meeting for Business was inadequate. We started our experiment of devoting one hour a month to the consideration of a set of Queries in a worship sharing environment. In these sessions we are beginning to get beyond the perfunctory questions of Quaker practice, and discover the deeper spiritual ground on which those Queries are based.

In May the Meeting received an invitation from an inmate at the Maryland Correctional Institute at Hagerstown to hold a meeting at the prison. At first this seemed impossible to the Ministry and Care Committee. Later, however, a member was "reached" by this request and the opportunity it offered us to remember those closed in by high walls of concrete and our own forgetfulness. Negotiations with the administration began in September and meetings are scheduled to begin in January, 2005. A number of Patapsco Friends have spontaneously volunteered to join this effort.

As Thomas Gates declares: "Membership in a Quaker meeting is a spirit-led journey of coming to know ourselves as individual-in-community, a journey on which we experience meeting as a place of acceptance, a place of shared values, a place of transformation, and a place of obedience." Patapsco Friends Meeting has made a serious commitment to that journey, and has travelled far in 2004.