

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report – 2012

Approved 6/2/2013

How does the Spirit prosper among us?

The Spirit has been with us as a wise counselor, a loving presence, a prompter of caring actions, and as a weaver and mender of our Quaker community. Spiritual leanings and messages that seemed to transcend all others during the year came from the queries on Caring for One Another, namely:

- *In what ways do I show respect for that of God in every person?*
- *Do I reach out to those in distress? If I find this difficult, what holds me back?*
- *Am I comfortable making my own needs known to my Meeting?*

An unfortunate incident that occurred during our annual retreat reminded us how important it is to continue to pay attention to our words, our actions, and our inactions so that the spirit of warmth, community, and sensitivity to others will remain with us in our spiritual circle of Friends and in our lives in the greater community. Our response to the incident was Spirit-led. It deepened our sense of what it takes to make each member of our spiritual community feel welcome and safe.

What supports the life of the Spirit in our meeting community? What challenges are we facing?

What began as a painful experience during our retreat evolved into an ongoing deep listening and healing process that took our Quaker community to a healthier place. The fact that we all took responsibility for what happened at the retreat has been cited as a reason the healing process was more successful than attempts at healing from prior incidents. We held a threshing session, followed by several meetings of an expanded Ministry and Care Committee, and a healing circle gently guided by a Quaker facilitator. The healing circle process included worship, worship sharing, and a discussion of the following queries: What do we need to feel welcome and safe in our meeting community? What do we expect from others when we have been wounded by a hurtful comment or action? What is needed to repair harm and make things better in our community? What are some possible next steps?

As a follow-up, we have available written procedures or Advices on Dealing with Disagreements/Conflicts/Issues, a flip chart available each week to record thoughts from Meeting for Worship or regarding other matters, and procedures to increase access to members of the Ministry and Care Committee for those with concerns.

Three ongoing reading groups speak to the healthy life of the Meeting. A group that meets monthly to read and discuss Quaker pamphlets has rich and thoughtful discussions that deepen our spiritual lives. Friends that meet after rise of meeting to discuss Howard Brinton's *Friends for 350 Years* have broadened their understanding of Quaker history, values, and practices. A third group that is reading *Fit for Freedom not for Friendship* is finding this provocative historical overview of American Quakers and race a helpful introduction to sensitive conversations about race, diversity, identity, and respect for that of God in every person. For many of us, it is a revealing experience that nudges us forcefully out of complacency. The reading programs are often attended by people outside our meeting community. We also have a monthly meditation group that meets before Meeting for Worship.

Our Meetings for Worship usually include vocal ministry and deep silence. Some people speak often and others seldom or never, which may be a challenge for us, but there is space between messages and

a sense of connection among them, indicating that we are Listening. We integrate time to hold others in the Light as they are named, and this practice helps foster our sense of community.

We have a rich program of “second hours” that challenges us spiritually and connects us with others. Examples include workshops on “spiritual simplicity” and polarizing talk, presentations on Quakers in Kenya and on a local daycare center for people who are homeless, and a fundraising workshop on “un-cooking.” We also came together to sponsor a successful yard sale to benefit a homeless shelter and sponsored a showing of the movie “Friendly Persuasion.” A sale of Quaker books at Christmas time was much appreciated and filled many of our stockings with nourishing reading.

Our religious education program continues to present a challenge. It is difficult to attract children to a program when we have so few families with pre-school or school age children. We recognize how much families with young children have contributed to the life of the meeting since the first planning session for Patapsco Friends Meeting in August 1996. In 2012, we held a joyous (but bittersweet!) pool party in June celebrating the graduation of most of our original First Day School children. Currently we enjoy staffing a nursery for one young child, who is cherished. Another young Friend attends Meeting for Worship.

Because we are a small community, we find it challenging to continue the tradition of simple meal each week, although we recognize the importance of continuing this practice which everyone enjoys and which promotes a sense of fellowship and warmth in our community. As one visitor noted, “For a group that meets in silence, I have never heard any group more talkative during simple lunch.”

How is the presence of Spirit manifested in our lives individually and as a meeting community?

Members who participate in the groups described above say they have deepened their spiritual lives and our sense of community. Members also comment appreciatively about the kinds of support Friends receive when they are going through difficult times. Although we saw a decline in the number of attendees at Meeting for Worship last summer and early fall, we are seeing our numbers increasing. We also have seen increasing numbers of our members attending Baltimore Yearly Meeting. Our Sunday noon conversations and presentations have been meaningful and often attract people from outside our monthly meeting.

Individual members are active within and beyond the meeting, often with support from our community. Many members participate in a weekly worship session with the South Mountain Fellowship, a group of men imprisoned in the Maryland Correctional Institution at Hagerstown. We find their dedication to living Quaker lives in prison inspiring, and our discussions of Quaker literature and our worship together – though accompanied by external clanging and loud talk – full of Light.

Several members participate in People Acting Together in Howard (PATH) a multi-racial, non-partisan coalition of faith communities that engages congregations and community leaders on issues of justice and fairness that benefit families and individuals in our community. Two members travelled to other meetings to listen to their thoughts about the Faith and Practice. One member served as Recording Clerk at BYM, and another clerked the Chesapeake Quarterly Meeting and participated in BYM’s intervisitation program. Several women share life experiences and offer support to women from other BYM monthly meetings in quarterly gatherings for “Crones.” We also have members who active in the boards of Quaker organizations. One just completed a 3-year term on the Board of Pendle Hill, and another has begun a term on its Governance and Nominating Committee. Two members serve on the Board of Friends House, and another serves on the Board of Friends Journal. In both senses, one Friend observed, we are a “mighty little meeting”!