

Patapsco Friends Meeting 2016 Spiritual State of the Meeting

Recently, we had a Listening Session after meeting to begin to assess the Spiritual State of the Meeting (the SSOM). It was well-attended and everyone spoke. Below are some thoughts summarizing the speakers' messages.

And Friends meet together, and know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was. George Fox, Epistle 149

To reflect on the spiritual state of the meeting is to address our connection with the Inner Light or Spirit within ourselves and within the corporate body of our meeting.

The SSOM also speaks to how our meetings for worship, business and committee meetings, as well as interest group meetings evolve in the context of the Spirit. Is it an aspect of ourselves that we connect with in our meetings? Are we connecting with others' Spirits while together? Are we fostering this connection with Spirit as individuals and as a community?

Many Friends at our meetings for worship believe we are connecting, at times, with our spiritual selves. Some Friends report they often leave these meetings feeling refreshed and renewed by the community and the community of Spirit. For many Friends, Patapsco Friends Meeting is their home, where they can be authentic and feel safe. They appreciate the depth of feeling in many of the messages they hear in meeting as well as in their committee meetings. They feel the support of others while in their interest group meetings and feel led to participate in a manner that they may not have in other venues.

If we are unified with one another, we are, in turn, led to reach out not only to ourselves, but to the larger community beyond our Meeting. Nurtured by our Meeting, many Friends are led to work for social justice in the wider community. One example is that some members and attenders of our meeting hold weekly meetings for worship with South Mountain Friends Fellowship, a worship group of incarcerated Friends at Maryland Correctional Institution, Hagerstown (MCI-H); this

experience spiritually sustains all involved. Others work for prison reform through the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform.

We have a variety of interest groups that provide on-going spiritual sustenance. Beyond our Meeting for Worship, Friends can participate in a Meditation Group, or A Course in Miracles Study Group, a Quaker pamphlet reading/study/discussion group, and a prayer group. Friends help serve at Our Daily Bread and/or assist an immigrant Syrian family. Our Spring Retreat and Friendly 8's gatherings are also an opportunity to enrich our community and spiritual life.

Although there is a general sense of the meeting that Friends feel supported, nourished and loved as well as encouraged and supported to grow spiritually and to follow diverse leadings, we are not in unity that everyone has the experience of acceptance and inclusion. In fact, one Friend described our meeting as less than spirit-driven and that, in fact, we may have harmful intentions.

We have not found a solution to this issue but we faithfully seek to listen to all concerns and to maintain an open, receptive mind in our search for answers. How is the meeting contributing to these perceptions? How can the Loving Community be healed?

There are some issues that can be easily resolved. For example, on Third First Day when we have committee meetings before Meeting for Worship, why do so many of us come to meeting for worship 15 minutes late? Does this practice imply that our committee meetings are more important than Meeting for Worship? This is an issue that our committee clerks are striving to change.

Generally, we attempt to be mindful of others' diet restrictions when preparing and serving Simple Meal, but we are not perfect and occasionally a dish is not properly labeled or explained. Diet restrictions at our Meeting present quite a challenge and include: gluten-free, vegan, nut-free and soy-free diets.

Other thoughts expressed were: are we as inclusive as we like to imagine ourselves, or are we in some ways exclusive and 'cliquish', either intentionally or unintentionally? Do we follow 'Quaker process' as

faithfully as we might? These queries are certainly worthy of serious consideration.

Spirit is not hurt by such perceptions; we are mindful that in life there is always disruption and discord. The way of Spirit is not a smooth one. Think of the spiritual journey that we each, individually, have traveled throughout our lives. Has it been a straight, smooth path? Or has it had periods of unrest, doubt, outright atheism, and other such states? Our meeting is larger than ourselves and if, at times, it appears that we have little control over our own lives, is it not the case that we will experience diversity of thought and actions in our meeting—sometimes those that may be even anathema to Spirit?

Is it not also the case that we continue to have a choice as to how we respond to diverse opinions about our meeting and its capacity to be Spirit-led? It is up to us to maintain enough connection with Spirit and when we seek spiritual guidance, alternatives of choice will be open to us and to others.