

The Spiritual State of the Meeting

“What matters is how we are with each other...{in the Spirit}”

Prior to our Listening Session, one Friend said the above words during the Meeting for Worship, and it seemed to resonate with us throughout our session.

Another important frame, shaping many of the responses, was an alteration of the query, “In what ways is the Meeting less than you might wish it to be?” One Friend suggested the query be: “In what ways is the meeting more than I thought was possible?”

Our meeting was described in many ways: fundamental to many of the responses was we meet Friends/Attendees/Guests through the forces of love, support, and friendship.

There is a sense that our meetings are, at times, Gathered. In Quaker worship, these are special times when a deep silence is felt. A unifying presence or a sense of universality pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and separation of our individual lives. Our spirits feel bonded.

It is within these times that Friends speak of feeling the transformative aspects of our community of spirit. One Friend addressed this phenomenon while speaking of a Friend, who has passed. This Friend, who in conjunction with her right relationship with God, our deep fellowship during Meeting, as well as her Prayer Group, discerned that she wanted a mutual and loving relationship with a man, which previously eluded her. In her remaining time with us, a sweet, loving relationship came to her, and it was the force of this love that we, too, shared and in which we delighted.

Others spoke of a sense of renewal that came with worship and the intimacy that is shared in committees and Simple Meal. One Friend said the sense of love and commitment to one another doesn't end on Sunday at 11:30, but rather is ongoing throughout the week.

Still others spoke to counting down the days until Meeting for Worship, as they knew that whatever troubles they brought to worship would be resolved or lessened by end of meeting and/or our gatherings after worship.

Many very positive, concrete adjectives were used to describe the Spiritual State of the Meeting and/or our meeting as a whole. Friends described our meeting as: nurturing, kind, accepting, and altruistic; a meeting that engendered spirituality, authenticity, gratitude, trust, a vision, and accountability. To address a few of these attributions, we will use the direct quotes of some of our Friends, as they are so apt:

Nurturing, kind, accepting and altruistic:

One friend noted that “part of the connectedness comes over simple meal, through Friendly Eights, through work together at Our Daily Bread. I thrive on the support we provide each other. You are made to feel supported here.”

Another said, “PFM—what’s important to me is what it isn’t!...It isn’t pressured...based on guilt, or shame...I had tried to find my place in other communities. Guilt, pressure and shame is what drove me away.”

A third said: “I’ve been coming for four months...for me, kindness wins out...I don’t know what I would have done without the help and love of this community. It’s become a home for me.” Finally, a woman who transferred to our meeting from another state noted that becoming part of our meeting helped her to adjust to her new community and her retirement home.

A meeting that engenders spirituality, authenticity, and accountability:

One Friend noted that “My experience and observation is that this Meeting excels at nurturing the Spiritual life through worship, activities, and programs. If you are looking to grow spiritually, this is one of the best places to come to!”

Several Friends noted that they feel “at home” at PFM and that they can be themselves. One Friend noted that she has to guard her opinions when with others, but at PFM, she can say what she believes. Another mentioned that at PFM, she feels like “I can be myself...That’s the remarkable thing!”

Finally, a Friend talked about our commitment to help one another and to hold each other accountable: “I want to note the vibrant nature of the committees. And how we deal with conflict. There’s a lot going on behind the scenes. It might appear that we let things slide. But that’s not the case. There is accountability here. Showing up for Meeting is a crucial act of accountability.”

Our groups: how we connect with one another and the community at large

We have a variety of interest groups that provide on-going spiritual sustenance. Beyond our Meeting for Worship, to name a few: Friends can participate in our Meeting’s committees, a pamphlet reading group, a Meditation group, MAJR (Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform), a Course in Miracles Study Group, Support Groups, two Spiritual Formation Groups, a Faithfulness Group, Our Daily Bread (serving food), book discussions, and various adult education topics. It is during these small groups, that often Friends become spiritual friends as well as finding support, direction, and discernment.

We continue to be mindful of others’ diet restrictions when preparing and serving Simple Meal. Diet restrictions at our Meeting include: gluten-free, vegan, nut-free, and soy-free diets. In discussions with other meetings, we

have discovered that it is often rare that a Simple Meal is prepared weekly. Our commitment to this weekly ritual is, in itself, an act of love which engenders much gratitude, socialization, and spiritual companionship. As always, there are problems: we sometimes fail to label each dish and remain mindful of the necessity of doing so.

One group that is almost absent from our meeting are children of all ages. We do have two children who come and we appreciate their laughter, clambering on the stairs, and their interesting conversations. We wish to have more children come and hope to address this in a variety of ways.

We have had a variety of new people attend during the last year, whom we greatly enjoy and appreciate. Let more come!!

Racism, sexism, environment, social justice, refugee crisis, immigration

- In our often-contentious societal climate, how does our meeting explore the above issues that can divide us? How do we listen across the divide?

Racism and Social Justice: One friend noted, “Our meeting has been active in prison reform. We know there are clear issues in racial inequality in the prison system.”

Sadly, the South Mountain Friends Fellowship that served a variety of inmates at the Hagerstown Correctional Facility has been laid down. There were many reasons for this action, but fundamentally, it was no longer viable. This action created much grief and consternation and also an equal impetus to find equal expression to the work and spirituality that was engendered there. The spiritual growth of the Fellowship participants was remarkable, and those from PFM, who encouraged the Fellowship’s inception and growth, grew spiritually in direct proportion to those who were imprisoned. Fortunately, many of the PFM members who were involved with the South Mountain Fellowship are involved in other forms of social justice, one being MAJR.

MAJR is a vital organization with many accomplishments, beginning with the Annapolis Friends Meeting where the movement started, and moving to other Meetings as well.

Some Friends think our Meeting is supportive of many kinds of differences/diversity. There were 50 different answers on the demographic survey recently completed by Meeting members regarding their diversity of background, etc... It will be interesting to review these.

We are also aware that because it seems we are open to all peoples, this in no way suggests we do not need to address the issue of racism openly and without guile. Friends suggested that it may be a function of white privilege that we have not formally addressed the issue of race in our Meeting. There is a statement on racism on the BYM website that we might wish to review and

understand spiritually, as well as intellectually. “How to approach having meaningful conversations about race” might be an important threshing session.

Sexism: One Friend said that “This Meeting is blessed with a lot of strong women.” It is true that we have many women who lead and are led in our community. It would be interesting to assess women’s role in our particular meeting and whether women, in particular, are in need of any spiritual sustenance and/or support.

Environment: For the first time, PFM has created and is working through the first year of a Unity with Nature Committee. It meets monthly and will convene a retreat in the upcoming months. One of the topics stressed by UwN is the need for Friends to avoid the use of plastic bags; the committee is working in concert with BYM on this issue.

Refugee Crisis: There is a PFM group who has been working with a Syrian family during the past year. The group helps the family with learning English, helping with homework, taking family members to medical appointments, looking into social welfare programs that may be appropriate, inviting them for Thanksgiving dinner, etc. These activities have been both frustrating and rewarding and gives one a small sense of the magnitude of the issues that refugees face in our country.

Immigration: Several of PFM Friends have been working with other faith groups to address, in part, the policy needs of the immigrants in our communities. This activity is very important given the political climate in which we live.

In sum, as one Friend stated, “We might want to think about our right relationship with animals, plants, indigenous people, etc.”

Our Vision

“What matters...at Meeting...is how you are with each other...{in Spirit}” As was noted at the outset of this report, the commitment to be with one another is important. While there is a dwindling in attendance at religious groups...our community is committed to a vision:

We envision a community driven by love for God, each other and the world...and to make visible the Kingdom of God within us.

