

2018 SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE MEETING REPORT

Introduction:

Patapsco Friends met following a worship sharing format. After settling into silence, Friends were invited to consider eight queries. Their voices and direct quotes frame this report.

What are our greatest joys?

“We create community in worship and celebrate together during Simple Meal.” “We trust each other. You don’t always find that in the world.” Others expressed they feel safe at PFM, enjoy the humor, and appreciate the intimacy earned in small groups and committee meetings. “I can share and feel like I can get help.” “...I feel like I belong.”

These central thoughts created a web for the many responses given. There is an element of trust in our Meeting which permeates the feelings we have towards one another as well as the possibility and, often reality, of real sharing and caring for each other. People like the way “we support one another.”

One Friend said, “I am so appreciative of the feeling of family at PFM. It is an unquestioned value that we have each other’s backs. I feel lifted up so often by what people share here. I feel lifted up in people’s caring connection.” Finally, one young Friend said, “I love being downstream from the Elders.”

What does our community do to strengthen our attention to Spirit with the political discord and expression of hate swirling in the world around us?

We have a variety of interest groups that provide on-going spiritual nourishment. 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, a Bible study group and PFM volunteers to PATH. (People Acting Together in Howard) It is during these small groups, that often Friends become spiritual friends as well as finding support, direction, and discernment.

On May 10th and 11th of this year, we had a retreat with Christopher Sammond and Rebecca Mays. The theme was on deepening into the heart of worship. We had an average of 25 people present and reveled in the depth of our connection and understandings enhanced by Christopher and Rebecca. Many of the people present during our Spiritual State of the Meeting Listening Session commented on the value of the Meeting having these grounding and deepening retreats and small groups. One person said, “When we reinforce worship, we strengthen the community...without that center, everything else becomes much more difficult.”

Another said, “Small groups and retreats allow us to develop deep personal relationships with each other...so when we do disagree, we don’t broad brush each other.” “The deep listening primes us to be able to be less divisive ourselves.”

Finally, it was mentioned we have very few political messages in MfW. Our Meeting is a refuge from the hate and political discord; however, a good majority of us are keenly interested in the world around us and engage in whatever ways we can—given our diversity of age and commitments—to creating a healthier, socially just environment.

Present and Future Challenges and Troubles

Our Meeting has two or three children that attend. We would enjoy more children, AND young people. There hasn't been an organized conversation as to how to bring more youth into our Meeting. These observations led into the comment that many of our population are older. One Friend was led to say, "What will the average age of our Meeting attenders be in 20 years? It is important to keep that in our awareness. What do we do about it?"

A young Friend said, "I feel incredibly welcome here as a young person. I know a lot of young people...I know how valuable the Meeting is to me."

Another Friend commented, "All religious congregations are facing the same challenge. You can listen to services on the internet, on TV. Our culture has also become more secular."

On a positive note, one person said, "We're actually growing, not shrinking!"

Another primary thread was regarding those members and attenders who are not "in the room...Having this conversation is always incomplete because some of the people are not here." There was the sentiment that we need to be aware of the challenges that people are facing. "Each of us is called to notice and reach out." It is also incumbent upon us to be cognizant of the conflicts in the room as well. These, too, need to be addressed.

Several suggestions were tendered; for examples, the Lancaster Friends Meeting has a Comfort and Assistance Committee. It is their job to reach out and notice who is missing or having problems. "Sometimes in the depth of your suffering, you don't have the energy to reach out." "At the Plainsfield Friends Meeting in the 1960's, there was a sub-committee on counseling. At that time there was an understanding that sometimes a Friend might not wish to share problems with someone in their own Meeting. Friends might feel more comfortable talking with someone from another Meeting. This was done individually, not arranged by the Meeting and was always done confidentially."

One wise Friend commented, "It's important to remember we cannot be all things to all peoples."

Strengthening Our Quaker Roots

During the past year, we have had a monthly Luminaries discussion. The Luminaries are famous Quakers, both current and past, who have left a lasting legacy to subsequent Quakers, and others, who follow or read about them! These sessions are well attended and enjoyed by all.

We also have a monthly pamphlet group. This group gets together to discuss Pendle Hill pamphlets of all types. The group varies as does the leadership and the discussion. People find it bonding, and informative.

Our library has much about the history of Quakers and our roots.

Messages during MfW will, at times, contain historical references, which “little by little helps me with my understanding of Quakerism.”

One person commented she would be interested in learning more about the role of the Elder in Meetings. We had the opportunity to see Rebecca Mays act as our Elder during our recent retreat. Many of us were inspired by her example and would enjoy learning more about the role.

Do we avoid tension by not discussing differing points of view?

A Friend, who has been part of the Meeting for 20 years, remarked that when the Meeting began it was understood that “people don’t talk about each other...We can disagree in a loving way.”

A second person remarked, “I am impressed with our ability to face contrary points of view, that are not our own. We don’t exhibit intolerance for others points of view.”

On a different note, another Friend noted, “I am not sure that we’ve really been challenged in this community with discordant views.” Further she said there are no climate change deniers or passionate anti-immigrant views. “Other Meetings have had to go to these hard places...for instance, [discussions about] Palestine and Israel. We haven’t had to go there in recent years.”

All agreed that it is our intention to be a welcoming place for differing points of view. “But, how can we make it clear to people that it is important to voice concerns about differing points of view. People have a tendency to just walk away. It could be political, but not necessarily. If they won’t share their point of view...we might never know why they disengaged,” offered another Friend.

A beautiful summary of this query is as follows: “A lot of what we do here is about holding. We hold in the light, in our listening, we are held by the Spirit...The ability to hold allows us to hold the tensions in life and living together. I see a capacity to hold a great deal of tension. We are all called to be holders of tension whether we like it or not!”

What are our leadings?

This query led to many immediate responses: We have leadings to enjoy learning; for more and more deep worship; to pursue Social Concerns; to help the Syrian family; for Unity with Nature; to feed the hungry, serving at Our Daily Bread monthly; to enjoy each other; and a leading to care. “There is generous love and letting other people know you [in our Meeting].”

“Speak as if you understand from the very beginning that you can’t take it back...People here are careful about their words. We come forward to care for each other.”

Is the Meeting less than what we would wish and if so, in what ways?

For the most part, many of the Friends’ comments were positive rather than critical. For examples, “Bewildered by how good what we have here is.” “Our Meeting is sooo full and rich and beautiful. Why would I wish for anything to be different?”

In contrast, there was more yearning for more young people.

Finally, one Friend commented that “we tend not to draft a minute that goes on and up through Quarterly Meeting and beyond. In a sense we are a private Meeting not a public Meeting.”

This invited the response, “If you sense we need to do this...you can teach us how!

Is your Meeting diverse?

We have diversity of thought...We have “microtheologies.” Diversity of thought and philosophy. [Credit for the concept of “microtheologies” goes to Christopher Sammond]

One Friend said that striving for diversity made him uncomfortable. “We are Friends of Truth. Not Friends of a diverse truth. We try to teach a Quaker way. Bound up by listening. It would be a diversity if someone felt listening were not worthwhile. But I would not strive for that!”

Our Meeting has a degree of what is generally considered the markers of diversity: ages, race, and, as mentioned above, micro-theologies. We are hoping to attract more young people and people of color.

During the past few months, many of us have participated in a series of Courageous Conversations. It is a movement in the Howard County community to talk in small groups about enhancing our community’s ability to talk across racial and religious differences. As a consequence of these conversations, we hope to continue the conversations and activities with community members in a variety of ways, both large and small.

We also are moving toward creating a Change Group within Patapsco Friends Meeting. This specifically deals with the issue of racism and all of its manifestations, and what we can do as a group to build a strong foundation of social justice as manifested in both our PFM community and the greater community.

Conclusion:

There is much that can be and has been said about the loving nature of our Meeting. We care for one another and are careful of one another’s feelings and beliefs. We have noble aspirations and also very down-to-earth ones. We want our Meeting to grow, become more diverse, act on our values, and to continue to follow our considerable leadings. Ours is a Meeting that tries our very best to meet the needs and challenges of

those who enter our doors. We are steeped in Spirit and understand that it is Spirit that undergirds all of our actions and interactions. We are grateful but never complacent! As one Friend said, "Our potential for growth is endless."