

Bethesda Friends Meeting Spiritual State of the Meeting Report -- 2011

"And Friends, meet together and know one another in that which is Eternal, which was before the word was."

-- Excerpt from a pastoral letter from George Fox to early Friends

The core of our spiritual life together is the time we gather in Meeting for Worship. Friends find the quality of the worship deeper and more centered than at times in the past. Even when no spoken messages are offered, Friends often find that the worship feels gathered.

The sense of a spiritual community experienced during worship is enhanced for many Friends by other opportunities to be together outside of Meeting for Worship. Friends value the Spiritual Formation program, now in its second year with 21 participants; the regular Experiment with Light guided meditation program; and the many and varied pre-worship forums offered by Adult Religious Education, including on themes related to the Bible and to Quaker testimonies. All these offer occasions for personal spiritual growth. "We learn from one another and explore and discuss what is in our hearts and minds," one Friend said. We are able "to walk together and hear what others are thinking and doing."

We recognize that Meeting for Worship for the Conduct of Business is central to our lives as a worshipping community but is not as well attended as we would desire. How do we better convey to both active members and to those who want to become more involved, the importance of Business Meeting? A dialogue is currently under way about how we might increase participation at Meeting for Business. The emerging consensus is that Meeting for Business offers a way for members and attenders to better understand how Quakers work, to spend additional time in fellowship, and to "own" the Meeting. This is relevant to the spiritual state of our Meeting in that the strength of our community supports and reinforces our communal worship.

Friends express a desire for other opportunities to come together outside of worship, but the busy daily lives and limited discretionary time of many members and attenders complicates the task of providing such occasions. Modest participation at some Meeting events has disappointed and even frustrated some Friends. Is this a lack of interest or a response to the over-scheduled nature of many of our lives? Others wonder whether alternatives, even simply "fun" activities, might offer new occasions for us to know one another on a more personal level.

Yet, while we contemplate adding more activities, are we availing ourselves fully of the existing social opportunities like Friendly Eights and zip-code dinners? We know that building and strengthening our spiritual community is important. It is also a process that is never complete as individuals move away or are absent due to family commitments, even as others join the meeting with new interests and concerns. One Friend said, "It is a challenge to orient people who are new to Quakerism, but a notable number keep returning." We have felt this ever-evolving change in our Meeting this past year as several long-time, deeply involved members moved elsewhere, even as other, newer members have taken on responsible positions.

Our spiritual community is undergirded by the ties of love and caring we build both through the Meeting's committees and the personal bonds that are created as we worship and work together in the Meeting and in our everyday interactions.

We recognize our responsibility to ensure newer individuals, and particularly families with young children, are welcome in our community. Yet some Friends who have come more recently to BFM feel

the need to become involved gradually. "It is helpful to me not to feel pressured to socialize or commit to multiple committees and activities before I am ready," a Friend who recently joined the Meeting said, "I have appreciated silent worship and the opportunity to approach the meeting at my own pace." Another said, "For someone eager to get involved, there are plenty of openings. For others, like myself, who are grateful for a community with which to worship, but with existing service commitments, I haven't felt pressured to join in more than I already have."

We accept that it is not uncommon for groups to have a highly committed core on one end, occasional and infrequent participants on the other end, and a range of participants at different points on the spectrum. We want to be warm and welcoming to everyone and to make room for them to participate in whatever way is meaningful to them. So we try to offer opportunities for people to connect, but respect that they will participate in whatever way is consistent with their desires and abilities.

Friends also recognize our need to more intentionally engage our children and youth. Friends involved with our First Day School (FDS) program express concern about the erratic attendance of many of the children and youths in the program and would like to see more adults involved as part-time teachers or occasional volunteers. One parent observed that if families had more information about the FDS curriculum they would be better able to talk to their children about what they are learning and reinforce the program's themes at home. Friends agree that children also benefit from interacting with older individuals. At the same time adults can gain an appreciation of the growth and vibrancy of the Meeting by joining even the youngest children in nursery in the simple task of rolling out Play-Dough for them to press into stars and animal "cookies."

Several Friends expressed the hope that the Meeting might become more involved in service projects. Recent examples, such as adults and children working together in events like Spring Fling or outside activities such as collecting food for Manna, are good ways to put our Quaker values into action. As one Friend said, "Instead of telling children what we believe, we show them by example." For their part, the youths in the Senior High group said they have enjoyed community service projects they have done through the Meeting and would welcome more such opportunities.

Several Friends expressed an appreciation that the Meeting is "doing well." One member suggested, however, that "rather than saying we're doing well, so let us keep things as they are, could we not hold the thought that we're doing well, and wonder together how we can draw on our strengths, become more conscious of how change might work for us as a Meeting, and invest in it?"