

State of the Society Report for 2013

May 17, 2014

Query for Reflection: How are faith, love, and ministry evidenced in your meeting?

Faith, love and ministry combine and intertwine in the lives of Friends and in Friends' meetings. An attempt to separate them into categories often seemed arbitrary and artificial.

FAITH

Our monthly meetings report strong, rich experiences of shared, lived faith. Faith is perceived “as a journey, not a destination,” and therefore “we seek and expect communion with the Spirit... depending on ourselves individually and corporately to discern the right path.” Meetings identified many examples of how faithfulness arises out of Spirit. From Bible study, to embarking on Quaker Quest together, to monthly devotional singing, meetings offer members and attenders ample opportunities for exploring and living out our faith together. Some individuals chose to participate in FUM’s “Forty Days of Prayer.” Some Friends felt their faith was expressed and shared through making and enjoying music together.

One meeting reflected that a trust in Quaker process was itself an expression of faith. Another said that “...when we do as we are led, we will find Divine guidance.” Commitment of time and participation in the life of the meeting are acts of living faithfully with one another. Several meetings appreciate worship-sharing meetings, weekly spiritual writing and discussion groups, and spiritual nurture groups that allow the faith community the time to know one another better. One meeting is deliberate in promoting a monthly gathering to hear about one member's individual spiritual journey. As a society the individual faith impulse is treasured and tended in our corporate bodies.

Worship is also deeply respected and cherished. Many, many meetings spoke of the strength and “depth of meeting for worship,” including meeting for worship with an attention to business. Other meetings echoed this sentiment, saying that they “feel spirit among us” in worship, that “worship is deep and Spirit led,” and that “gathering in Spirit feeds us all.” Friends reflected that it is energizing to see members' emphasis on faith and prayer, and that faithfulness in worship leads out after the rise of meeting, for as one community put it: the “spirit of worship...can accomplish whatever ... needs to be done.”

Our commitment to one another is reflected in how much we cherish our Meetinghouses and the sense of community provided by Monthly Meetings. Many groups spoke of feeling that their Meetinghouse is a sanctuary, providing “a place of peace, a respite from anxiety.” The willingness to plan building renovations takes a “leap of faith.”

Our monthly meetings “draw us into a community... blending worship and work, faith and practice.” Friends have faith that “the meeting will be here” to provide support. We practice a “ministry of presence” at meetings for worship, which “sustain and hold” our meetings together. One group asserted that “meeting is a place where Faith is renewed and strengthened and spiritual values reaffirmed.” It is here that “we come together for worship each week in the faith that others will join us,” and “people from many different faith traditions worship together harmoniously.” For one meeting, a “focus on truth supports our individual spiritual growth and our growth as a community.”

Guided by a sense of historical connection to Friends of the past and NYYM queries and advices, faith means doing our best and asking God’s guidance. It means seeking a closer

relationship with God and serving Him as opportunities arise. It means expressing gratitude. We believe that “God will bring us all back to God’s light.”

LOVE

Love is manifest in our meetings in myriad ways.

Love is manifest by responding to each other’s needs. In our meetings we provide rides for those who no longer drive or have no car. We reach out to shut-ins and run errands for those who are ill. We do shopping and pick up Friends who have been discharged from the hospital, getting them settled back into their homes. We call and visit members in need of support. We honor requests from Friends to hold them in the Light.

Love is manifest in seeking to better know one another and accepting one another for who we are. One meeting spoke of moving through difficult decisions with the realization that “the more we came to know one another, the more love there was.” Another meeting is able to state that “we trust one another to listen and to speak with love.” Many meetings say that social hours and opportunities to 'check-in' give us opportunities to hear and hold what is important in one another's lives. We believe as one meeting put it that “everyone has something to offer” in the life of the meeting. We feel a connection to and affection for each other and for distant members.

Love is manifest in a strong sense of community. We abide in the comfort that strong community brings. We share fellowship with pot luck dinners, brunches, breakfasts and picnics. One meeting sends cards for attendees' birthdays, and one sends packages and letters to college attendees away from home. These are more than gestures but are concrete ways of caring for and nurturing the bonds between us.

Love is manifest in the ways that we work together. Meetings spoke of the joy we feel in service to our meetings. We share stewardship of buildings, grounds, and cemeteries, and we welcome the gifts and active participation from newer attenders. One meeting reminded us that there is no sense of “keeping score” of how much each person does for the meeting, as each one offers what they can and are led to offer.

Love is manifest in our meetings through our inter-generational relationships. Our meetings spoke with one voice in our appreciation for all of our members and attendees across the life spectrum. We feel strongly that our meetings are more vibrant for the ability to recognize the unique gifts and talents of attendees including those of children. Several meetings spoke of a revivification of their First Day Schools and curricula, involving the whole Meeting in child care and First Day School activities to foster inter-generational relationships. First Day School curricula can include racism awareness, Earth care, Quaker worship, “Living the Quaker Life,” and integrity. Meetings echoed one another in their feelings that “children are the life of our meeting,” and “the heart of our ministry.” “Nothing brightens Meeting more than the sound of children’s voices.” Meanwhile, there is also great care and respect for the gifts of elder members of our meetings, and many, many meetings mentioned training and collaborative efforts with ARCH. Meetings actively engage with aging members and stand ready to help with the challenges that aging can bring.

Love is manifest in reaching unity. Our process of living in community and using Quaker process to make decisions manifests our love. One meeting reports that there is a feeling that “in love we can step back from our own personal visions and move forward in cooperation.” Meetings are making an effort to hear and listen to one another. The process of coming to unity over an extremely divisive issue builds trust and love. Some of our meetings faced challenges

and crises in the past year, and have weathered those only by faith and love. One meeting reflects that, “The year wasn’t always easy, yet with faith in God and each other, we were able to persevere.” Another meeting, contemplating a difficult decision that they had to make together, writes, “We gave this decision much study and prayerful thought, letting ourselves be guided by faith in the process, love for one another and the Meeting, and trust in the Spirit.” Meetings feel we are guided by the “belief that we can overcome life’s adversities with help from each other and from above.” However, “it is not the case that the trust and community we share is automatic; it arises from our willingness to stay involved and listen for Spirit.”

Love is manifest by reaching outward from our meetings. Our meetings welcome Friends traveling through from elsewhere, new attenders, seekers, and non-Friend peace activists sharing fellowship and witness. Friends report that special worship meetings for marriage and memorial meetings present attenders to those events with what is often their first experience of Quaker worship, and attenders share that they are moved by the silence and the vocal ministry.

MINISTRY

One monthly meeting says that, led by Spirit, “ALL is ministry.” Our ministry happens both amongst Friends and in the larger world. “The Spirit is the ground water, which nourishes the fertile bed from which our various ministries grow. It runs beneath the surface, a continuing source of life to our community. What we do and what we believe comes from this Spirit.”

Our meetings for worship are marked by diverse ministry. Many meetings expressed a deep gratitude for worship, in all of its forms. We are profoundly fed by our worship together, approaching “worship with a spirit of openness and love, welcoming all who come to be enlivened by Divine Presence.” Some meetings remark that their meetings are generally marked by silent waiting worship, and that the silence can “speak more loudly than talking.” We report that there is a sense of unity to be found in the silence, and that meeting for worship can “hold us and allow each of us to be where we need to be.” We also appreciate vocal ministry in both unprogrammed and pastoral meetings, and report that the “quality of messages continues to deepen our centeredness.” Another meeting says that “vocal ministry that is Spirit-led can be a blessing for the meeting.”

Other ministry among Friends can include practical ministry such as doing dishes, providing childcare, empowering members to be greeters for visitors, contributing to committee work within the meeting, and helping with First Day School curriculum, planning, and teaching. Friends confess that working on Newsletters, making the meetinghouse handicapped accessible, establishing Clearness Committees and other support committees for Friends, and participating in Meetings for Healing are all the work of ministry undertaken with faith and love. One meeting approved a travel minute and care committee for a Friend joining an FGC New Meetings Project. Another meeting offers support for a Young Adult Friends Group. Other Friends are deeply involved in NYYM committees and sessions, and carry concerns both to and from the Yearly Meeting. Some meetings financially support Quaker organizations and international missions, collaborate with Friends from surrounding meetings, and participate in Powell House and local retreats. One meeting hosted a “Quaker Conversations” series to discuss Friends’ testimonies, faith and ministry. Another organized a “spiritual journeys retreat” using art, movement, and role-playing.

In the larger community, we believe that “the way we carry ourselves outside of Meeting is ministry.” “Taking something into the world” from the meetinghouse and reaching out to “help the real problems of other people in the world” are part of our faith and practice. We endeavor,

by the Spirit's leading, to make our witness and our lives our ministry. One meeting tries to respond on both a group and a personal level to Friends' testimonies, but confesses that it is "the quiet persistence of individuals that affirms the spiritual presence in our meeting and wider community."

Friends are deeply engaged in a variety of work, answering That of God where we find it. We are committed to regular peace vigils in many communities, and organized vigils against air strikes in Syria. One meeting worked with the larger community to open a homeless shelter. Other meetings are active in interfaith organizations and wider parish fellowships. We try to maintain a vibrant public presence in our communities, from public speaking about Quaker faith and history, to participation in community events such as music festivals, garden club activities and historical society gatherings. One Meeting led an outdoor worship service at a nearby state park. Other commitments include collection for food banks, distribution of food baskets, and gathering and distribution of clothing and furniture for those in need. Several meetings spoke of working together to help clear some of the damage remaining after Hurricane Sandy. Another meeting brought snacks to Habitat for Humanity volunteer builders. Friends have spent time visiting and entertaining at nursing homes. One meeting is committed to a monthly worship group at a continuing care facility.

Our Meeting houses are loci of ministry and places of welcome and hospitality. We have offered free movies on peace, justice, and environmental topics, workshops on aging and end-of-life issues, music-making and contra-dance, book discussions on spiritual topics, annual Quaker-themed fairs, a program on forgiveness, "Seeking the Spirit" sessions, and special holiday meals and worship services. We have opened our Meetinghouses to the public, and to other religious organizations. One meeting hosts the Vietnam Veterans for Peace.

Finally, our ministry has included specific witnesses, including prison ministry, letter-writing on behalf of prisoners of conscience and in support of marriage equality, efforts in support of the NYYM Apology to Afro-Descendants, laboring to create a minute on gun violence, reaching out to a war tax objector who has served jail time, and making grants for attendees to participate in workshops of service organizations. In the face of great need in the world it remains our hope that "... faithfulness to a leading can blossom to serve all of community."

CONCLUSION

In answering this query, reports from our monthly meetings reflect a hope that our responses to concerns and individual and corporate leadings will "continue to evolve as we listen tenderly to Spirit."

The monthly meetings who responded report a robust life of faith, love, and ministry in our communities. We feel connected to one another and to the wider community at this moment, and that connection leads to engagement in witnesses and ministries of all kinds. As Quakers we are trying to create a web of inter-relationship that carries our experience of Spirit-centered worship out into the world. One meeting concludes its report, "We are mindful of the value of nurturing faith, love and ministry in all that we do and we remain committed to listening for and obeying the guidance of the Divine Light that lives in each of our hearts." Another testifies, "We hope for renewed faith and energy; we pray to be good listeners; we hope to grow closer in the Light and with the help of the Spirit find direction."

Although this year's query did not directly address our Meetings' struggles and concerns, a significant number of Meetings expressed concerns about the following:

- aging group/ shrinking numbers
- small numbers mean same Friends hold positions for many years
- understanding why members and attenders leave the meeting
- not enough engagement with wider community
- how to meet the physical and emotional needs of the larger community
- financially supporting meetinghouses and property
- avoiding risk of becoming “a political social club”
- diminishing interest in peace and social concerns
- wish to devote more time for sharing joys and concerns
- improving outreach through websites and social media
- desire to be more inclusive to all
- lack of children for First Day School
- ambivalence about Christian focus, and tension between Christo-centric and “liberal” Friends