

State of Society Report 2014

Introduction

This past year at Cambridge Friends Meeting has been one of substantial change. The phrase “in transition” has come to be a way of being, as new paths are forged, new structures put in place and a new energy comes to the Meeting. When undertaking to write the State of Society Report it was, therefore, vital to make certain to include as many voices in the report as possible. The method chosen was to devise a series of questions and offer a multitude of opportunities to provide responses, including using time at the December Meeting for Business in Worship, making announcements at the rise of worship, and sending queries out to community. The questions posed were:

- What are your feelings, positive and negative, about Friends Meeting at Cambridge at the present time?
- What are some of the accomplishments that you believe have happened at Friends Meeting at Cambridge over the past year?
- What are some of the areas you believe we may not have examined adequately?
- How do you see the spiritual condition of the meeting?

These questions and the collective response thus form the core of this year’s State of Society Report. While there might have been other questions, other methods of collecting information, it seemed that these questions were both broad and personal enough to allow individuals to reflect on their experiences at Meeting while providing enough concrete responses to base this year’s report on. There were many responses from a wide variety of individuals and the report is an attempt to reflect everyone’s voice and understanding.

Spiritual Life of the Meeting

At the core of Friends Meeting at Cambridge is Meeting for Worship and what happens there informs and guides the remainder of our experience together. Friends are consistently growing and shifting in their understanding and feelings about the worship and spiritual life of the Meeting. One Friend writes, in response to the query on the spiritual life of the meeting, that it is “acceptable....I mean that.” The question to elaborate on is: what is acceptable? What does it mean to the many different people and how do we move from acceptable to something potentially greater and deeper?

Over the past year there has been much talk and much work done on improving and strengthening the spiritual life of the Meeting. For many individuals spirituality and worship is a singular and individual

journey. One of the greatest strengths and one of the most significant challenges is how to nurture individual journeys within a collective. For some, those different journeys cause a worry that we are “failing to transmit the richness coming from one theological perspective to our First Day school classes” and “do not provide enough support to those who share a theological background (e.g., those who believe in Jesus Christ).” It is a reasonable and fair point that potentially in trying to do many things we lose the depth and intensity of doing a single thing as a collective. At the same time, other individuals feel that the very attempts the community makes to simplify and focus on the divine provide their own sense of “solace” in worship. A Friend noted that many of the individual members of the Meeting have a great deal of “wisdom and life experience [to offer] and the meeting is better for it.” Those Friends who have had a great deal of experience in dealing with the complexities of Quakerism and in finding joy in these complexities provide role models and patterns for the Meeting as a whole.

What is very clear from the messages received is that spirituality and worship within the Meeting is very much alive and flourishing. There is, “a new excitement and energy in the Meeting” that is touching all elements of life. Ad-hoc committees such as the Core Working Group, Deepening Spirituality sub-committee and Bolder and Deeper Witness group are all clear examples of how groups are shifting to express a new understanding of spirituality. It remains clear that while we have made a beginning of examining our collective spirituality and worship, there are still areas where we need to grow and change. It remains an ongoing goal to find the right balance for Meeting for Worship between quiet contemplative thought and vocal ministry. One Friend described Meeting for Worship as similar to “strapping yourself in for a roller coaster ride.” Nonetheless, the work that finding that balance takes, the work of exploring one another’s spiritual journeys and faiths is itself work that has allowed stronger worship and spirituality to develop. The questions of whether political, intra-psyche or secular messages deepen the worship or take away from it are questions that have been asked for the entire period of Quaker life. It is these questions that have led to much of the vitality and energy in the Meeting’s spirituality and worship.

Accomplishments

What we have called the “Beneficial Cycle” is well on its way. The “Beneficial Cycle,” for those unfamiliar with the concept, is the mutual reinforcement of a robust community/spiritual life, outreach, and witness. There has been a careful effort, over several years, to develop the strength of the Meeting community, and remove obstacles to growth by applying the principle of the Beneficial Cycle. One essential thing that should be mentioned is that the Beneficial Cycle works! After implementing the Beneficial Cycle, Meeting has seen significantly higher attendance at worship and at First Day School, a vigorous population of Young Adult Friends, a Quaker Voluntary Service project, an amazing array of family-oriented events (ski trips, coffee-houses, story-telling), lots of Sunday afternoon activities and many visitors, some of whom become part of the Meeting. The Design Committee Recommendations for spending time and money on the Beneficial Cycle were for a finite number of years (we are currently in this period), after which the Meeting will need to assess where we are as a community. If we find that we are vital, but our programs are not financially sustainable, the Meeting will have to think about

where to go from here. Regardless, we will have learned a lot about ourselves, about Spirit, about how to live in Love.

One major accomplishment of the Meeting this year, which has contributed to all others, has been the implementation of a new and far-better-functioning administrative structure for staff and facilities. We have replaced multiple committees having supervisory responsibility with a staff structure supervised by a Resident Friend. This new structure has worked so smoothly that it has been most notable for being all-but-unnoticed.

Over a number of years, the Clerk's role has expanded to an almost full-time job. We hope to reduce the responsibilities of this role to the point that a Friend with other major responsibilities (such as job and family) could fulfill them. For the time being, we have addressed the problem by establishing a Presiding Clerk Team of six Friends who for one year take it in turn to preside at monthly Meeting for Business, and share the other duties of the Presiding Clerk. This arrangement has worked well but is recognized as a short term solution. There are on-going efforts occurring to find a something for the long-term.

There has been much work undertaken to connect to a wider community. One of the highlights has been that the Meeting will be serving as the Host Meeting for a Quaker Voluntary Service (QVS) House in the Boston area. There has been significant work and also a great deal of joy in thinking about the positives a QVS house will bring both to the community at large and also to the Meeting. There has also been significant witness work: from praying for stopping our dependence on coal, at the coal-fired power plant at Brayton Point, Rhode Island; to the monthly Meeting for Worship at cluster-bomb manufacturer Textron; to our annual Good Friday leaflet, focused, this year, on the need for a world without nuclear arms.

Needed Areas of Growth:

Within any community, any group of people, there will always be areas that present additional room for growth, areas where we may have fallen short as a community and areas where people have disagreements and hurt feelings. This is to be expected and the fact that we have had our share of these moments and experiences this year represents the reality of working together. Our failures and mistakes are, in fact, an opportunity for us to look closer and work with more focus. One of the most prevalent thoughts, as illustrated by Friends' written comments, is that while the Meeting has undergone a tremendous revitalization with many people more involved and more committed than previously, there are still conflicts between individuals and between groups of people. The conflicts are not the main issue, more important is that we have not cultivated enough ways to truly address these conflicts within a loving community. It was noted that "careful and active listening [is] sometimes an unutilized skill." Conflicts are, far too often, swept under the metaphorical rug rather than addressed to directly and with a goal of resolution and reconciliation.

While there are many reasons for conflict, one is that “too much planning tips the scales toward the top-down process that Quakers have traditionally eschewed.” The implication is that with only a few individuals involved in the planning, there is the possibility of losing the group process of the Meeting. Very much connected to this idea is a fear that the leadership has become more insular and that there is not always transparency and information regarding why or how certain decisions are made. It is important, particularly in a Quaker community, that there is community unity in all decision making and yet, at times, some have felt this principle has been abandoned for the sake of efficiency. The time needed to truly discuss and listen to all individuals can feel overwhelming; however, when we avoid this process we lose part an essential part of the Quaker process. The process of seeking unity and truly listening to all voices is possible within the Meeting and over the past few months has been illustrated by the ongoing threshing sessions on the Meeting’s response to Israel and Palestine. Many voices have been involved in finding unity on a minute of exercise, and this stands as a model for how we can, and should, continue.

While there have been significant and important areas of inclusion regarding youth and children, there also remains a feeling that “segregating children in one part of our Meeting” deprives them and the Meeting of a chance for deeper connection.

One of the areas that provide the most disagreement among Friends has to do with the Meeting’s connection to the wider world. While some individuals believe deeply that “the Meeting should be more concerned with spiritual [rather than political] things,” other individuals feel just as strongly that we are not “tuned into the needs of the wider world” and that we risk becoming “insular” if we are not turned outward enough. While it is true that it remains impossible to commit fully to both of these ideas at the same time, the discussion of where we are led to be and what it means for us to move forward, past this year and into the future, suggests that a frank and honest discussion of many of these ideas will continue to be part of the Meeting.

Community

Many Friends expressed pleasure that our Meeting is a warm, welcoming place, a “community of supportive, kind people,” in the words of one Friend. Another Friend commented, “I see how people go about seeing the light in everyone, and that helps me try to do the same.” There is a sense that, in some ways, the face of the Meeting is changing with the addition of a strong, active Young Adult Friends community, a significant focus on an umbrella group to support families of all children and the continued participation of those who have been part of the Meeting Community for a long time.

In the past year, there has been significant focus on the youth and children as a part of our Meeting. An example of this is the interfaith program from Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ groups of the Our Whole Lives curriculum (OWL) which is designed to allow our junior high individuals to explore such pertinent themes as gender, sexuality and safety. This program is indicative of many of the values and challenges that are part of our Meeting life.

One Friend said that "I love the humanity and openness expressed at Meeting as 'welcome' indifferent to creed, class, or background." We have certainly grown significantly over the past year and there is, always, a great deal going on at the Meeting with new opportunities for connection and growth. This sense that there is always something happening does, at times, come with a price. We do not often enough look at what we're doing and ask if there is life in a particular activity, or should we let it go? It seems that it will be impossible to continue to add to our programs without being willing to forego some of them when we are no longer led to do them.

Finally, while much of the Meeting has been deepened and strengthened in the past year, our level of financial contributions has not grown at the same rate as has our community engagement. It should be noted that contributions to the Meeting did increase this year, as compared to last year suggesting that we are heading in the right direction. The reasons for lack of enough financial contributions remain complex, although one comment was, "I don't think FMC asks me for money enough" and perhaps just asking more often for money would strengthen us financially in the same way that presenting opportunities for participation has been strengthening us spiritually. Yet, for the Meeting to continue to be the strong and vibrant community this past year has shown it to be, financial contributions will have to increase more and how to accomplish that remains one of our significant challenges for the coming years. One of the many hopes for the Beneficial Cycle is that implementing it as part of the Meeting's culture, will increase our vitality enough to inspire increased financial contributions. The Meeting has taken a significant financial risk and spent a portion of its funds in order to implement the Beneficial Cycle with the hope that by investing financially now there will be long term growth and financial stability.

The Meeting is a place that many of us view as a spiritual home, a place where when we walk through the door there will be people who smile, say hello and ask us how we are, in addition to truly wanting to know our answer. The power of that community is, in great part, what has led to the tremendous shifts and growth that the Meeting has made in the past year and we hope will continue to make in the years to come. The power and love of the community is an expression of God's love and of the Spirit which is a part of all of us.