

BYM SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE MEETING – JULY 2024

OVERVIEW

Reading the reports from Monthly meetings this year was a joy. We would like to dedicate this report to the young Friend from Adelphi Monthly Meeting, who told his mother, after last year's annual session, "I'm a Quaker."

The reports we received from Quakers in the mid-Atlantic region are full of hope, energy and good ideas. Our meetings are thriving and strong, asking themselves tough questions about how to get stronger and not satisfied with where things are.

The reports are chock full of ideas that other meetings might borrow to strengthen and build larger, more vibrant, beloved communities.

Our meetings remain centered in silent worship, drawing strength and listening for guidance from the Spirit.

ARISING FROM THE REPORTS WE RECEIVED

It was a year of **growth and exploration** for our Monthly Meetings. Many felt the need to write their own queries to reflect on their experiences and subsequently produced reports of self-reflection and insight.

Throughout BYM, meetings reported their meetings were experiencing unexpected growth. A concern that weaves through the reports is whether we are doing enough to welcome new attendees into our meetings.

Goose Creek Friends Meeting reported they felt "more needs to be done so newcomers know us better."

Homewood Friends Meeting called for a "recalibration" of outreach. "We can't do that unless we wrap our arms around each other," the report concluded.

One can detect a surprising theme from our reports: looking outward. Many Friends are wondering if our meetings are doing a good enough job explaining who we are.

State College Friends Meeting said we are hiding our light under a bushel:

Friends wanted to do a better job of communicating to others who we are and what we believe. Too often, Friends have to insist on what they are not: the Quaker Oats man, the Amish, or some other spiritual tradition, like the Shakers, that passed long ago. Instead of

asserting what we are not, we need to state, more clearly and more passionately, our testimonies and commitments.

We suggested a number of ways to take this opportunity:

- More t-shirts that say, “This is what a Quaker looks like.”
- A podcast devoted to living the Quaker life in our embattled world.
- A “Bring a Friend to Friends Meeting Day.”

Meetings continued to discuss and adjust how they deploy **video conferencing** during meetings for worship. After much discernment, Langley Hill Friends Meeting has adopted a rotating schedule so that some meetings remain non-hybrid.

Friends from Valley Friends Meeting and State College Friends Meeting said they feel a deep concern with the complex issues of **Climate Change** and challenged us to address the subject in next year’s SOS Queries.

ARISING FROM OUR QUERIES

1. Report on your meeting’s Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business.

Generally, monthly meetings viewed their MWCB as Spirit-led. There was almost universal wish that more Friends attend the meetings. There seemed to be a gulf between “the usual suspects” who regularly attend MWCB and other members.

Discussions were reported to be difficult at business meetings, according to the reports. Financial issues, in particular, caused divisions between Friends.

Homewood Friends reported:

“Yet we are strong enough as a community to also experience contentious meetings for business, recognizing that faithfulness to the Light is a challenge. Through disunity, the truth and the Light can reveal themselves. Worship is a safe place for the Light to instruct. It is not always a warm Light. Sometimes the Light is terribly harsh and helps us look at difficult things.”

2. How does your meeting practice the Quaker peace testimony?

War in the Mideast and Europe, rumors of wider war, and the reality of stark political divides at home has had a profound impact on our meetings this year. There was a broad concern about where the world is headed.

Friends at Sandy Spring Friends Meeting put it well:

We feel a deep and abiding concern and even worry for the future of our meeting, for the Religious Society of Friends, and for spiritual life in the world as a whole. We cannot know what spiritual nurture future generations will desire from our community. We are anxious and together seek a centered quiet.

Discussions of politics spilled into our worship and many meetings grappled with political messages. Meetings reported that their members pondered whether they were doing enough to make clear their commitment to the peace testimony. It was widely felt that peace begins at home and many families in our communities do not experience this peace. Friends at Williamsburg Friends Meeting shared a quote that Friends “should shine the light in the corner of the world where you live.”

3. Diversity and Anti-racist work

It was heartening to hear Monthly Meetings see anti-racism work is a spiritual concern. Meetings expressed a wish that their meetings could be more diverse. They are looking for ways to build ties to the Black residents of their communities and be helpful when needed.

Maury River Friends Meeting discussed being alert to an instance where found a way to lend a hand.

During 2023, Peace and Justice began to look into an issue of environmental racism in our neighboring town of Glasgow. Persistent flooding there is disproportionately affecting neighborhoods that are predominantly African American. Working through Rockbridge Conservation—and local leaders in Glasgow, a knowledgeable Maury River member has been helping to write effective grants that can provide resources to remedy the flooding problem.

The Carlisle Quaker Meeting reported it was a big deal when a recent program on the Underground Railroad filled its meetinghouse to capacity and attracted a large number of Black neighbors.

A Friend commented that this event was a “big deal” for us – eye-opening evidence that we can connect to the community to the extent of filling our building. Our involvement with friends in Mt. Holly Springs (a small nearby community) who are seeking to restore a historically Black church associated with the Underground Railroad has helped that group make the case for additional funding from a state agency.

Attached to our report is an addendum with a brief description of what each of our Monthly Meetings said about their anti-racism work.

4. Does your meeting suffer from the arrogance of certainty?

Friends welcomed this query and said it was something they should ask themselves regularly. Some Friends said they would be shocked if their meeting didn’t experience this arrogance and there was a general call for need for vigilance.

Dunnings Creek Monthly Meeting said it well:

We asked ourselves about the arrogance of certainty. Friends asked, “Doesn’t everybody have subtle prejudices, and sometimes not so subtle?” When there are difficult discussions, it is easier to NOT see “that of God” in others. We have been making an effort to notice the prejudices we

see in ourselves. One Friend reminded us that we might take care and beware of the “holier than thou” trap when in meeting we talk of other religious groups. It would be good to tenderly alert that to each other when we see it. A sense of humor is a priceless gem.

Intriguing ideas

Here are some innovations that we want to learn more about:

- Dunnings Creek - “Still Listening Series”
- Blacksburg Friends Meeting holding a “sensitive topics forum”
- Homewood Friends Meeting naming the persons who have died each week by homicide in Baltimore City.
- York Friends Meeting setting up a writing table for cards for absent Friends

Closing thought

We close our report with beautiful words from the Goose Creek Quaker Meeting. When we gathered in the Meeting House to talk about the spiritual state of our meeting during the past year, one Friend said it all in a few words, “The love we have for each other is our foundation.” May we move forward in that love, guided by the Inward Light.

Addendum I—BYM Committees and Working Groups

How Spirit moved through BYM Committees and Working Groups SYM Spiritual State of Meeting report

Growing Diverse Leadership

Spirit moved through the work of GDL this year helping them focus on finding ways to get Young Friends more involved in the Yearly Meeting. The plan is to hold a Young Adult Gathering sometime next year. This work was a catalyst to bring the committee together. The committee became more engaged, and felt that it was doing important work.

Stewardship and Finance

Stewardship and Finance has established a variety of Best Practices. They read the antiracism queries and ask themselves how they apply. They meet at a regular time and place with a “great clerk” who keeps the agenda, manages the time, and follows up with both their tasks and tasks undertaken by others, all while keeping the meetings spirit-centered. We started a new procedure inviting committees who are making budget requests, including Reparations Action Working Group and Working Group on Racism to speak at the annual Apportionment and Budget meeting so their insights can be more widely shared with the meeting community

Friends Helping Friends

Spirit moved through the committee helping them discover that going out to talk to Monthly Meetings was an excellent way to communicate.

There had been a struggle previously as Friends felt that reaching out to the FHF group was a sign that they were weak. In the Monthly Meetings, FHF explained that we all will have conflict in our lives unless we move to isolate. Working on a conflict is saying that “I care enough about you that I want to work with you.” Working on it gets people to a deeper place.

Stride

There is no committee or working group at this time. Rachael Carter, STRIDE Program Coordinator, will be giving a yearly report during the fall interim session.

Working Group on Racism

During this past year we arranged for Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training to spend a day and a half with Friends throughout the Yearly Meeting who are engaged in this work to develop more of the skills, understanding, and spiritual grounding they need. We have also arranged for funding for BYM Global Majority Friends in their efforts to heal from racist trauma they experience.

WGR Friends are greatly heartened by the growing efforts of others in the Yearly Meeting, both individuals and local Meetings, to help BYM become a truly antiracist faith community. We work especially closely with the Growing Diverse Leadership Committee and the Reparations Action Working Group. We also contribute as invited to the antiracist efforts of Strengthening Transformative Relationships in Diverse Environments, the Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee.

End of Life Working Group

The End-of-Life Working Group’s book *A Tender Time: Quaker Voices on the End of Life* was published by BYM in June 2024. It is the culmination of years of work revising and greatly expanding the 2018 Langley Hill booklet on death and dying. With guidance and editorial support from EOLWG, Patti Nesbitt (Sandy Spring) and Kristin Zimet (Hopewell Centre) compiled a unique collection of Quaker voices, both historical and contemporary. An open-hearted primer from a Quaker perspective, the book explores many practical, legal, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the end of life. Writing this book has been a collaborative and spirit led process that has touched the hearts of all involved. Pendle Hill has scheduled three seminars in the Fall 2024 around the book’s topics and a First Monday lecture in January 2025. More activities are requested by various meetings throughout the yearly meeting and beyond.

Peace and Social Concerns

A member of the committee said, “The Spirit moved among us (this past year). We listen to each other. Didn’t always have the same idea but there was no conflict. Everyone on

the committee had a lot of experience and had valuable insights. There was Agape on our committee this year.

There were two Working Groups: Ceasefire and Reproductive Justice. Both groups sent minutes to Interim Meeting. In April, they held a working day for Peace committees from all the Monthly Meetings. They worked with Quaker Voice of Maryland. They worked on prison reform. They worked on six pieces of legislation in the Maryland Assembly; 3 passed.

Ministry and Pastoral Care

A positive thing the committee did this year was to open dialogue on anti-racism with BYM groups like Working Group on Racism, Reparations, STRIDE, and the Global Majority. The discussions felt Spirit-led and good relationships have been formed. The committee was delighted with our retreat with Clinton on Trust Circles. Coffee hours have been a tool to help Monthly Meetings share their initiatives and concerns. Themes arising from coffee hours and from Annual Session last year have included anti-racism efforts, overly frequent speakers, and working with Working Groups under our care.

Addendum II – anti-racism Monthly Meeting highlights

2023 BYM Spiritual State of Meeting Report. Meetings discussion of their anti-racism work

Adelphi Friends Meeting:

-In many ways, Adelphi leads the way for BYM on anti-racism work. Adelphians' journeyed toward anti-racism with help from the Change Group, Peace and Social Concerns Committee, 2 small change groups, Friday film discussions, book clubs, and individual activism.

Annapolis Friends Meeting:

- Came together for a session on "Journeying toward Justice and Repair" with Lynda Davis to help us deepen our understanding of Quaker roots through learning and reflection.

Blacksburg Friends Meeting:

- Had a *Sensitive Topics Discussion* about reparations. Several members attend the local Dialogue on Race group.

Carlisle Quaker Meeting:

- Held a program on the Underground Railroad and worked on restoring a historically Black church in Mt. Holly Springs.

Charlottesville Friends Meeting:

- Assisted with meals preparation for unhoused women with a local non-profit. Read anti-racism queries quarterly.

Deer Creek Friends Meeting:

- Has a reciprocal relationship with Hosanna AME Church, supporting their efforts to restore a museum

Dunnings Creek Friends Meeting:

- Making an effort to educate themselves and invited musicians from other countries and people of other faiths to the meeting for fellowship and reducing prejudice

Frederick Friends Meeting:

- Change Group's readings on racism and potential solutions.

Friends Meeting of Washington:

- Anti-racism has become a core concern for the Meeting as a whole, nurtured by the Committee on Ministry and Worship. Strengthened participation in the Black-led Washington Interfaith Network

Herndon Friends Meeting:

- Ant-Racism Working Group working with the town to change the historical marker on property to note the building's history as a segregated library.

Homewood Friends Meeting:

- A new Dismantling Racism Working Group has begun to offer activities. Worked with Stony Run Meeting and the Lillie Carroll Jackson Museum to sponsor a talk with Charles Chavis, director of African and African American Studies at George Mason University.

Hopewell Center Friends Meeting:

- Attended activities of the local AME Church and hosted an interfaith unity picnic.

Little Falls Friends Meeting:

- The meeting recognizes it could be doing more to facilitate learning about and recognizing the individual implicit biases of members.

Mattaponi Friends Meeting:

- The meeting said that the believe that there is "that of God in all" is the remedy for healing the systemic racism in our culture

Maury River Friends Meeting:

- The meeting's Peace and Social Justice Committee worked to help a Black neighborhood in Glasgow that has suffered disproportionately from persistent flooding.

Midlothian Friends Meeting:

- The meeting's Racial Justice Study Group provided new ways to look at race relations

Patapsco Friends Meeting:

- The meeting's Change Group offered a variety of presentations and book studies to have difficult conversations about racism.

Patuxent Friend Meeting:

- Wrote a minute to send to the local school board in opposition to an effort by Calvert County Public Schools to remove language acknowledging white privilege and the legacy of racism.

Richmond Friends Meeting:

- An ad-hoc committee on race and racism "examined harmful ingrained cultural approaches in powerful sessions, while lifting up the rich contributions and joys of racial diversity. We struggled, and continue to struggle, with the boundaries of our own experiences."

Roanoke Lynchburg Friends Meeting:

- The Meeting works closely with the local chapter of the NAACP and the Roanoke City Police Department and plays a central role in Groceries Not Guns, a gun buyback program.

Sandy Spring Friends Meeting:

- The Change Group hosted a Juneteenth Celebration with the local United Methodist Church. The group worked on how it could be more effective in facilitating change at the Meeting.

Shepherdstown Friends Meeting:

- The Meeting supports and participates in a monthly Vigil for Racial Justice in Martinsburg

State College Friends Meeting:

- The meeting's Climate Justice Working Group presented a Climate Racism slideshow at the Upper Susquehanna Quarter Fall Family Gathering last September.

Stony Run Friends Meeting:

- The Library Committee worked to broaden the collection of works that explore LGBTQIA+ and anti-racism themes.

Takoma Park Preparative Meeting:

- Members participate in Adelphi Friends Meeting's anti-racism efforts.

Williamsburg Friends Meeting:

- The Meeting hopes in 2024 to return to discussions on racism that were previously held during the pandemic.

ADELPHI FRIENDS' SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE MEETING, 2023

Many thanks to Friends for sharing your thoughts, feelings, hopes and Light with us, that we may all provide needed support for one another and the wider world, in alignment with our highest Quaker values.

How are you progressing in your spiritual development?

Are there aspects of your spiritual experience that would benefit from deeper exploration with Friends? Are there changes or opportunities the Meeting could offer to support you?

Adelphi nurtures spiritual experiences in these and other ways: Meetings for Worship (MfW), second hours, faithfulness and other small dedicated groups, clearness processes, committee service, film discussions, bible study and social justice activism.

MfW is “profound. I settle into a spiritual garden with people I care about, willing to be moved, looking for the best and highest good of us all. I practice... humility and non-judgment.” A Friend sees our community as “an amazing catalyst for my spiritual and personal growth.” Another feels “more centered” in MfW as a result of participation in a faithfulness group. “Afterthoughts are often very enriching.” From the silence and vocal ministry of MfW, a Friend received “a real softening” of the effects of a previous faith tradition. A Friend appreciates “the afterthoughts table at potluck, with a member of Ministry & Worship facilitating.”

Many Friends expressed a desire for increased support in developing and deepening their personal relationships with faith. A Friend said, “I do not know how I am progressing in my spiritual development.” From others, “What is spiritual development?” “I have a deepening desire to explore Spirit with Friends.” One of us observes that “spiritual development seems wider in the past year or so, rather than deeper.” “Adelphi feels very active, but mostly [efforts are] directed outward.” A Friend sees “Seeds of Peace as a “junction of action in the world and a time to reflect on” Quaker values. Many Friends asked for opportunities to join faithfulness groups, receive spiritual book recommendations, attend spiritual retreats and explore other forms of spiritual partnering, all offered in a “systematic” fashion.

A Friend asks, “how are people grounding themselves?” in our turbulent world. “The difficulty our Meeting has had in responding to the Israel-Palestine conflict has been a struggle” reflects this Friend’s own conflicted feelings on the matter. There were multiple requests for opportunities to explore our peace testimony as challenging events unfold.

Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) serves us as a source of spiritual support. A Friend finds sustenance in a BYM faithfulness group and its Adelphi members who gather independently. Annual session provides opportunities to “meet people, learn from one another and get input from lots of other Meetings.” After attending annual session, a young Friend proclaimed to his mother “I’m a Quaker.”

Does the Meeting provide both spiritual and social sustenance to you and your family?

What benefits, if any, come to you and to others through our community? How do you contribute to the life of the Meeting? Does your membership at Adelphi, or lack thereof, affect your sense of belonging?

Many Friends find that spiritual and social enrichment go hand in hand. "I've invited small groups of friends and neighbors onto my porch to talk about ordinary things and 'soul feeding' things. How do we get to know people in Meeting on a deeper level?"

A Friend finds satisfaction by participating in a small change group, Seeds of Peace discussions and online Bible study. Another "cherishes getting to know people through committees." A Friend describes, "dealing with [the] deaths of several significant people" in their life "and receiving support from Meeting and others... has increased my faith."

On Committees

"AFM is my home town... I feel at home, safe... so much joy comes from. [committee] work — more joy than obligation." "How much I benefit from Meeting life may correlate to what I put into it. The more involved I have become,... the more nourishment I experience." "There is love and support for the work and [for] each other." "Delivering food to households... that are dealing with sickness or crisis feels like "divine catering.... Love in action." Such service is seen as an entry point for looking "more deeply at historical and spiritual development." A Friend admits, "I feel I have an obligation to help others and contribute my talents at Meeting, even though sometimes it is not easy." Another found that committee work "takes my focus away from spirituality." A Friend gets sustenance from MfW and "related activities;" and they "find a real challenge in not doing too much" in the face of many needs; this Friend wants the opportunity to learn how others navigate this. One of us observed that as they become more engaged in social justice work, spirituality goes to "the back burner" and they wonder how the two "feed each other."

"Adelphi as a community provides many opportunities to talk about spiritual and related topics with people who have thought deeply about these things and who... communicate 'tough-to-talk-about topics.' I participate as much as I possibly can." At Adelphi a Friend discovers opportunities to "learn new things." Meeting provides a "richer understanding of the area I came to live in." People speaking their pronouns is a "dramatic experience, powerful... to my kid." "I hear of 2-3 people helping each other, in small ways beyond the committee structure [in] an astonishing, inviting community." A Friend with a relative described as "on the spectrum" is aware through joys and concerns that others are facing similar circumstances; they would "be strongly attracted to" opportunities to come together around this topic. A women's group member "loves the mutual support and outreach." Multiple gentlemen want to join a men's group, but don't know how to go about it. They said the "Women's retreat sounds wonderful" and they would like one too!

Difficulty hearing, both in-person and on Zoom (“captions help”), combined with discomfort around asking for transportation, created a sense of “disconnect” for a Friend. Potlucks, both online and in-person, are not inviting to multiple Friends who identify as introverts. “How do I find ways to plug in” to the community?

On Membership

“What is membership and how does it work?” asks a Friend. Another wants an explanation of “the differences between being a member and being an attender, and [a description] of how one goes about seeking membership.” “Rather than start a membership process, I would like to talk with a small group about what membership means.” A Friend considering membership wondered whether they were “good enough to be a Quaker;” and felt reassured by the clearness committee. “Attending and being involved at Adelphi contribute to a sense of my belonging.” Many Friends feel that becoming a member changed their relationships to the community, in terms of “commitment, safety and obligations,” in the words of one. “We recently became members and I feel a different sense of belonging... an internal shift when we joined.” “Being a member, asserting ‘I am a Quaker’ became part of my identity.” “Post-retirement you need to have a community that ... notices if you’re not there, and appreciates your contributions... Was my decision to seek membership an intention to become a Quaker, or acknowledge that I already was? This gives a sense of belonging ...I belong here.” It is also a commitment to invest” in the community. This Friend wants newcomers to be welcomed into this sense of belonging. Another “loves that you can belong without being a member [since] many people are challenged by organized religion.” This Friend wants us to focus on cultivating “belonging over membership.” Hearing this Friend speak shifted another’s idea that membership was “similar to a gym membership which seemed to imply mandatory attendance.” This Friend was “touched” by the previous speaker’s words and decided, “This is an identity I want to have.” And an attender Friend “feels that I belong, just as I am.”

Does the Quality of Worship Speak To Your Condition?

The quality of the silence? The quality of vocal ministry? How might you contribute to gathered Meetings for Worship where there is a sense of togetherness with one another and with Spirit?

”I love the community of silence, the practice of clearing my mind to still myself. These are some of the best moments, the most refreshing times of the week.” A Friend speaks about silence, “I crave more of it. It’s been an... enriching type of worship.” Another appreciates “the ‘surprise’ of who speaks, and what they bring to us.” “It’s powerful when messages build on one another and weave together into larger...” experiences. Multiple Friends observe that “what I bring to” MfW affects their experiences more than external factors. One Friend finds that “the contribution I...make depends on what I bring to worship, especially in the extent to which I am practicing a spiritual discipline on a regular basis.” A Friend describes their practice in MfW: “I center myself, beam out my love and compassion, with the intention of being an open, willing channel of higher Love, in trust this contributes to the gathered Meeting and [to] togetherness with one another, and with Spirit.”

A Friend requests that we provide a few words “at the beginning and end of each worship about the silence, listening for Spirit, discernment and holding each other, even when a message is not for you.” A Friend would like support in “fully shutting off and [eliminating] mental and visual chatter.” A Friend states that “the capacity to hear a message is universal” and asks that we “continue to make space for new voices [as] we are stunningly blessed with new people.”

On Vocal Ministry

“I find both the messages and the silences enormously enlarging of my spiritual journey... I revisit the messages for a long time afterwards.” “I think when I get to the point of identity and responsibility, I expect to be more comfortable with vocal ministry.” And a Friend notes, “vocal ministry has drifted to social/political commentary. Sometimes MfW is more like afterthoughts or second hours.... It can pull me out of connection to Spirit [and] into the political world.” One Friend explains that although they “feel the togetherness, it seems different from years past.” Another responds, “We used to read more together, minister to one another a little more.” Another Friend adds, “since I tend to talk a lot, I work to sense when I am really led to share a message.... It is part of my spiritual discipline.”

On Joys and Concerns

“Whenever I have a concern, I find that people reach out and it’s very healing.” A Friend feels “that this is the place to take personal, worldly concerns... that are not messages.” A Friend requests more silence between joys and concerns so they “can be held in divine Light.” A suggestion was offered to pause for the time it takes for three deep breaths. This was received as “helpful.”

On Technology

A Friend is “so happy to be back to worshiping in person,” and is equally glad having Zoom, “as a backup.” One of us observes, “I don’t think I engage fully in the spiritual process when I am online.” A Friend who frequently manages the technology on Sundays says their service “detracts from my ability to be present.” And a beautiful correlation is shared by a Friend, “Discussions about the quality of worship make up for the shortcomings we’ve had. It has brought out the quality of our community and how closely related that is to the quality of our worship.”

On Viruses

Two requests for “better air filtration,” were made in light of current contagion rates.

From Young Friends in Junior Meeting

Young Friends especially value the social and community aspects of Meeting. In particular, potluck is one of the things they value most about Meeting. Their enthusiasm is both for the food and for how it helps to build community – they’re very happy that there are a lot of people there. They like the abundance of food that is available – enough for second and third helpings—and how delicious it is!

Young Friends appreciate First Day School and Junior Meeting. There is enthusiasm for the new format that features music and games on the first First Day of the month. They love learning the songs – especially the Vine and Fig Tree song. One young Friend also expressed appreciation for the time and space for joys and concerns in Meeting for Worship. This also helps to build community.

When asked what they would like to do or see happen in 2024, they had a number of suggestions:

- They'd like more – and more fun – field trips. They enjoyed the visit to the Hobbit House in 2023 and they would like to do more recreational activities, like visiting an arcade, a pizza parlor, a Froyo factory, or a movie theater.
- In First Day School, they would like more experiential activities, including focusing on breathing, being together, and engaging in conversation. They weren't so excited about learning about Quakers. One young Friend wished for a clock in the room.
- They are excited about Strawberry festival. Younger Friends advocated for the opportunity to be a server in the café in 2024.
- The younger elementary students are enthusiastic about continuing to create and care for an Adelphi Friends garden. The older elementary schoolers also expressed a wish to be part of the gardening project.

Young Friends are aware that they make contributions to Meeting, too. First and foremost, they bring themselves to be part of the Adelphi Community. They bring food to share with others in potluck, including figs and pizza and bagels. They bring their imaginations, including bringing a unicorn to Meeting. And they bring many precious qualities to the community, including love, happiness, strength, fun, and joy.

How has your journey toward anti-racism, and the Meeting's journey, affected your spiritual growth in the past year?

Adelphians' journeyed toward anti-racism with help from the Change Group, Peace and Social Concerns Committee, 2 small change groups, Friday film discussions, book clubs, and individual activism. Our efforts focused on learning history, and expanding both awareness and accountability for thoughts, words and actions that may harm Global Majority Friends.

This work is compelled by our core belief that there is that of God in everyone. "Antiracism work is spiritual work, and it is central to my spiritual development." "Spiritual development is action." "Deep trust in seeking the Spirit kept it from being political."

"I still have the raw edge of racism within me and working with Friends is very helpful." Quakerism has a lot of work to do, "and I find the work to be needed and scary." This work is seen as "tending to vulnerable people." "At Meeting, our anti-racist discussions and information are coming from a trusted source...Receiving info through Meeting, even though available from other places, allows me to trust the source and ask what does this mean for me." A Friend trusts the Meeting "to provide information and facilitate discussions without hidden agendas." "Facing our challenges without defensiveness is easier to do with the Meeting's guidance." "I want to work on what do I do now?" "My awareness of institutional racism has been dramatic since 2020. "It's appalling I didn't know these things...I could stick with it here because I was in company with people to learn with others and support each other." There is a desire to become a community where "more People of Color participate in Meeting."

Because of AFM's focus on anti-racism, a Friend comments, "I am keeping this issue much more 'top of mind'.... It is part of my spiritual growth and my complete humanity." Another "value[s] seeing the slow evolution... in knowledge and action." One Friend describes the work of the anti-racism monthly accountability group they are in, "We look at where did I encounter racism this month and what did I do or not do about it?" Our shared efforts, "show me where I need to pay extra attention." A Friend wonders whether we might benefit from collaborating with other faith communities. "The commitment... to work on this issue has really been growing."

"This feels like a place where the issue is being grappled with in a genuine way, which is a vast improvement on how it is handled everywhere else." "I joined the Meeting because of AFM's work on anti-racism!" Work done on opening to same-sex marriage, on embracing LGBTQ Friends and in striving toward anti-racism "has taught/is teaching me to expand my universe of "us" and "family" and to whom I belong."

Appendix

This year, Ministry and Worship asked Friends Community School to contribute its reflections on the spiritual state of the school to the Adelphi report, with two queries tailored more closely to a school rather than a meeting.

1) In what ways is Friends Community School providing spiritual nurture to its students, their families, and its employees? Are there particular areas of growth? Are there areas that need special attention? Has Adelphi Friends Meeting contributed to the spiritual condition of the school? How might Adelphi Friends Meeting contribute more, or better?

For the purposes of this response, we are defining the provision of spiritual nurture as creating opportunities for members of our community to explore our desires for purpose, meaning and an interconnection with others, grounded in Quaker values and practices.

Faculty, staff, and administrators at FCS do this in a number of ways. Most notably, Meetings for Worship and moments of worshipful silence are embedded into the flow of our school year. This includes our Wednesday all-school Meetings for Worship, which are clerked by our eighth grade students. AFM Members June Confer, Carol Hoage, and Anne-Marie Moriarty regularly attend these meetings. During these times, community members share words of encouragement, request that those gathered hold loved ones (and pets) in the light, and offer thoughts that are on their hearts. As you know, we also host a combined Meeting for Worship with community members from AFM and FCS each fall. Additionally, each year, FCS employees begin their pre-service week with a visit to AFM. There we experience MFW and learn about the history of FCS and its Quaker roots. For the past several years our celebrations of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr have included Meetings for Worship as well as opportunities for students to express their desires for the community. These continuing traditions make space for diversity and depth as they highlight the importance of making time and space to listen to the spirit as individuals and as a community.

There are other points during the school week when we sit in silence and listen for the spirit. Each Monday, Middle School students and faculty end their weekly "Middle School Meeting" with shared silence. Similarly, the full faculty and staff meet each Monday morning before school begins to share in a few moments of silent worship. On Wednesday afternoons, the full faculty and staff begin our after-school meeting time with shared worship and a "You Rock" activity in which we recognize someone for the gifts that they bring to our community.

Each Wednesday, prior to Meeting for Worship, we meet in "Meeting Partner" cross-grade groupings where we explore the Quaker testimonies and build community. This year's Meeting Partner groups have been focusing on the testimony of stewardship, and then tying this concept to the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. and to the topics of food scarcity and poverty.

Homeroom classes in our Lower School and Middle School advisories and Habits of Being classes are also places where community is built and values are explored. Students learn through daily experience to be thoughtful, kind, and compassionate, to take responsibility for the community, and to self-advocate and advocate for others. These timeless lessons build in students qualities and habits that they then take with them to high school.

This year, the Quaker Life Committee has played a pivotal role in building community knowledge of Quaker decision making. Members of Adelphi Friends Meeting and FCS' Director of Equity, Inclusion, and Community Life have collaborated in the development of Board education sessions that may be used with other members of the school community. The Board QLC is also contributing to a larger effort to articulate and clarify expectations regarding the school's provision of spiritual nurture to students, families, and employees. Through this process we hope to understand what that looks like in the context of an educational institution that does not have as formal or articulated an approach to providing spiritual nurture to its community members.

For further growth, we would like to see more opportunities for our faculty/staff and students to interact with Adelphi Meeting members, perhaps through shared acts of service. We would like to learn more about the current projects taking place at AFM and to see if in the near future we could find ways to collaborate. The more our students see adults taking action in support of their values, the better.

(Definition of spiritual nurture came from: <https://insights.vitalworklife.com/blog/2016/03/08/spirituality-nurture-a-found-ation-of-well-being>)

Has Friends Community School's focus on equity and belonging affected the spiritual growth of the school community?

If so, how?

This question is difficult to answer because we do not have formal measures of the spiritual growth of the school community that would help us describe how, if at all, it has been impacted by the focus on equity and belonging. However, anecdotally, we see a strong connection between the school's Quaker spiritual focus and our focus on equity and belonging. We believe that one informs and strengthens the other, and that they are inextricably intertwined. Students are taught to have respect for themselves and for everyone. They are taught to listen to the voices of everyone, child and adult, and they are challenged to think about what is and isn't fair about our society and about the world overall. In this way, our students are learning to see beyond themselves, to question why the world is the way it is, and to think about ways that they can contribute to a better world. While "spirituality" has many definitions, we see the development of this level of empathy and agency as deeply spiritual and in keeping with our school's Quaker founding.

Annapolis Friends Meeting
Spiritual State of the Meeting for 2023

Second Reading at Meeting for Business, Approved April 7, 2024

Annually, Annapolis Friends engages in a self-reflection process where we consider prepared queries, listening deeply to Spirit (the Light, God, Love, the Divine, etc.) and sharing our sense of Spirit's leadings for us aloud—with open heart. This process helps us gain clarity on our current spiritual state—both strengths and areas for needed growth. This report endeavors to capture the themes from our collective spiritual reflection on the 2023 spiritual state of our Meeting and serves as a response to Baltimore Yearly Meeting's request to account for the spiritual state of our Meeting.

Many expressed the value of worshiping together in our community, and pointed to it being a **joyous spiritual community** in which individuals show great care for one another. We are an unusually dynamic and welcoming, exciting Meeting. "This Annapolis Quaker community is one of the best faith-based community enriching and enriched groups I have experienced ...[we] are doing something very right, very connected, spiritual and loving." "I have been so moved by the worship and people. The spirit of altruism is what the Lord has shared. This, in conjunction with simplicity, has motivated me to reassess my own life. I have found much joy in attending."

Many conveyed appreciation for the **many forms for spiritual growth** that our Meeting offers. One Friend writes: "My spiritual journey is greatly enriched by my interactions with AFM Friends in so many contexts, including meetings for worship, learning, and attention to business, committee meetings, work on Quaker Market and our silent retreats. Over and over, I am amazed and touched by the deep wisdom shared so freely by members of our community." We are aware that each of these diverse gatherings have important spiritual meaning to those who participate in them. "It's important to understand all the spiritually rich things that are going on....I can't attend them all, but it is comforting to me knowing they exist and people care about doing them."

Some shared concern that because of the multiple forms of worship, we have **become splintered**. Expanding our 8am worship to meet weekly has been welcomed by those who attend and has introduced some need for adjustment as we negotiate limited space, back-to-back worship services, and added demands related to technology. Others spoke to the loss of opportunities for socialization, fellowship, and meals together at the heart of a sense of community. One Friend spoke of us as a collection of "scattered bones" that needs to be pulled together.

While some find the **technology less than satisfying**, others spoke to the rich gifts they had gotten from connecting to others through technology and blended meetings—that otherwise would have been lost. Zoom has made it possible for Friends at a far distance to continue to connect with us, to worship with us, to lead us in meeting for learning, and to share with us deeply spiritual messages. "To my mind there is absolutely no question that being able to have **blended meetings have greatly enriched our Meeting**." Some mentioned that technology has made it possible for those with **disabilities and health limitations** to worship with us in circumstances where attending in person would have been impossible.

Learning opportunities through Meetings for Learning, Worship Sharing and Bible Study are appreciated for their contribution to the spiritual richness of our Meeting. Using a blended meeting format, topics this past year included "Quaker Experience of Holding in the Light"; "Entering the Eternal Stream"; "Salvaging Sense of Meeting"; "Vibrant Committees"; "Bible Study: Old Testament" and The Parables of Jesus"; "2023 Triennial in Kenya: 'Come. Abide. Go.'"; and a 3-part "Living Our Truth" worship sharing series. These were led by those at the meetinghouse as well as those at distance from Annapolis—often with partnered leadership in the blended offering.

Despite the range of perspectives articulated, there was a **desire for wholeness** expressed. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves how can we come to see ourselves as whole, as one Meeting, as one faith community?

- Can we acknowledge that those who worship in a structure within AFM other than the 11:00 Meeting, are not absent from Meeting nor are they lessening our own spiritual experience?
- Are we open to the idea that some experience one form/structure of worship as more personally satisfying, more spiritual, than another? Are we okay with that level of individual difference?
- What shift in our own inner sense of spirit is needed?

One Friend writes, “I hope we can lean into and embrace a perspective of being one worship community with various forms of worship and spiritual enrichment, which I believe we currently are. This is a micro-opportunity for us to exercise our muscles of **building understanding across difference** even within our small world, recognizing the array of preferences for ministry, access through technology, perspective based on age, gender and race, and even understanding of what it means to be Quaker.”

In speaking to the queries, Friends noted that **Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business** is an integral part of our worship experience as a community—and it was characterized as impressive and efficient. “It helps our efficiency to have items prepared in advance by committees, but especially for challenging issues, we always benefit from greater use of silent worship before Friends speak,” and “We get a lot done, but we are so rushed.”

Those new to the Business Meeting process have found it interesting and satisfying. There’s a wish that more Friends understood the role of Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business and were able to participate in that process.

We continue to **address the contention among us** related to financial policies, fund raising and restorative justice efforts that fray our fabric. Unhealed breaches of trust from last year continue to challenge our sense of wholeness. One Friend expressed concern about “real and deepening divisions present within the meeting”, citing feeling marginalized and ignored. Another Friend reflected that how agreement is reached sometimes seems confusing, noting that “it seems that people are able to block reaching agreement” when they refuse to address an issue. Others question if committee discernment is adequately honored.

Several expressed concern about **how we bring Spirit** into our decision-making discernment and unity – how it occurs and whether it is occurring well. A Friend reminded us that “Patience is needed to allow Spirit, moving through the membership, to bring about a decision that expresses the sense of the Meeting...It is more important to have a sense of the Meeting than to have a decision made.”

- Do we enter Meetings centered and prepared to listen to Spirit?
- Are we releasing our points of view to Spirit to find a way forward?
- Are we seeking Spirit’s will or our own?

It will require more “prayer, worship, community gatherings, and the groundswell of devotion” to give us the spiritual strength to mend, renew, and expand our community and continue to flourish.

Friends seek to **broaden our welcome**, wanting to explore how we can become genuinely inviting to those whose absence saddens us, weakens us, lessens us. And, if the absence grows out of disagreements, how do we care for each other even as we disagree?

We are aware of our **yearning for young families and children** to be part of our community. We have a generational divide. Our Meeting is composed mostly of older adults. Children’s Religious Education

prepares and is present with almost no young people to participate. As one Friend writes, “I hunger for the gifts that come when children and young families are here. I feel the difference in the Meeting when we stretch across generations.”

We also long for **greater racial and ethnic diversity** within our Meeting. We wonder if part of our “arrogance of certainty” stems from our lack of awareness. Most who attend the Meeting are white and involvement with people of other races is limited. “We don’t know what we don’t know.”

Yet, our work to be an **anti-racist faith community** continues. We bring our queries as an Anti-Racist Faith Community to Meetings for Business to guide our decisions. Our long-standing Deconstructing Racism group offers a forum for spiritual discernment, support, and accountability in actions that we intend to take against racism. As we grappled with how to respond to the call for restorative and retrospective justice, we struggled to engage Spirit as we listened to differing voices and perspectives. We were supported by sharing readings and discussion during Black History month and came together for a session on “Journeying toward Justice and Repair” with Lynda Davis to help us deepen our understanding of Quaker roots through learning and reflection. We felt the tug of Spirit to move forward with a small step toward funding our Retrospective and Restorative Justice initiative.

We continue to wrestle together with finding our way forward. Questions about **Quaker process and discernment** raised during this Spiritual State of the Meeting process call us. We remain mindful of the unending work needed. What is the relationship between our anti-racist work seen as **activism**, and our anti-racist work held as **spiritual work**? What seeds of individual calling, and calling at a collective level are being planted now?

As one Friend notes of the urge to be more inviting and inclusive, “We need more thorough knowledge of the self-understandings of different religions, a more extensive understanding of the differing expectations for DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion] among ourselves, and a deeper understanding of the Meeting committing to serve and care for the spiritual and human needs of people who participate.”

We wonder how to **hew to our beloved traditions** without being blind to the **ways those traditions may create barriers** to new people just entering our community. How might those traditions conflict with what we yearn for? Are there practices that dissuade people or are similarly unwelcoming to others (e.g., Is the name “Friendly 8s” welcoming to everyone?)? In our manners and expectations, do we subtly project disapproval or a lack of welcome? Are we open to feedback about that?

We note the **significant effort required** to make a community like ours function effectively, and while some individuals have stepped in—especially during the pandemic—to keep us functioning, that level of individual effort may not be sustainable. Many Friends have expressed concern about workload that is exhausting people, worrying that we are perilously short of people to serve on committees and concerned that we may have lost those who were overtaxed and under-supported.

- How can we celebrate the efforts of those who have found themselves offering a great amount of time and energy in response to the challenges created by Pandemic season and also explore whether that level of effort is sustainable?
- Are we able to discern where our commitments as a Meeting outpace the resources of our volunteers? Are we willing to explore other ways to get critical work done?
- How do we manage the work if we do not have enough people to help? Can we accept our frailties when we can’t do it all? As in hiring tech support for blended meetings, are there other paid positions needed?

- How can we create inviting space for participation and leadership of those whose life stage or circumstances means their efforts are necessarily more limited or bounded?

Friends expressed their concern for **our ability to care for one another** as we age. “What weighs on my mind is our ability to provide pastoral care.” Are we able to look clear-eyed at the implications of the generational divide for getting the work of the Meeting done and for caring for our community? What discernment might lead to **greater health for all**? Are there paths forward that we are overlooking?

During the year, messages in worship have expressed concern about **war and the conditions that lead to war**. There has been regular posting in our newsletter of global opportunities to worship with Quakers for those in Ukraine and beyond. Assistance for those who are caught in the intersection of violence has been given through donations from our emergency funds. Our support for a local family from Afghanistan who was resettled to the United States continued. Yet, despite a query asking about the **peace testimony**, very few spoke to this as part of our spiritual discernment process. How do we make our concerns heard and not become overwhelmed by the enormity of it all? Or how might peace within us and among us, be the place to start?

As we reflect on 2023, we wish to **honor and grieve the losses** felt by some long-time members of the community who miss what Meeting once was and, at the same time, **spot the beginnings of what Meeting is becoming and might be**. One Friend writes, “I see the Meeting as feeling a little unmoored since the pandemic....I am optimistic we will find a cadence again, especially if we can see this as a time to experiment with new ways of doing things as we move toward a new ‘comfortable’ routine.”

We might think of this as a period of **continuing revelation**. We find strength and resolve in the silence and we strive to grow as a community. A Friend notes, “I appreciated...worship sharing on the spiritual state of the meeting. If only other organizations and institutions could adopt this quiet, respectful, insightful approach to annual reviews, we would have so much more calm and congruence in this poor, agitated world!”

Our work awaits.

Respectfully submitted by
AFM Ministry & Pastoral Care, April 2024

2024 Spiritual State of the Bethesda Friends Meeting

We aspire to listen deeply and inclusively to each other, to actively welcome all, and to attend in joy and faith to the Inward Teacher, whom some call Light, some call Spirit, and some call Christ.

Love, the outworking of the Divine Spirit, is the most potent influence that can be applied in human affairs, and this application of love to the whole of life is seen by the Society of Friends as the core of the Christian gospel.

From Baltimore Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice

Early each year, the Ministry and Worship Committee seeks to gather input and discern the spiritual state of our Meeting. To focus input, we posed four queries to the community.

We provided a variety of ways for BFM friends to reflect on the queries. We had a discussion on Sunday, February 11 at the rise of Meeting; we listened to input at potluck on February 18; we reached out to committees, soliciting their reflections; and we invited comment via email or a survey that permitted anonymous responses. We have received 44 individual responses, and group reflections from 4 committees. They provided a rich and diverse view of the spiritual state of Bethesda Friends Meeting during this past year.

Query 1 - What draws you (or drew you) to Bethesda Friends Meeting?

A great many friends referred to the warm welcome they received and continue to feel at Bethesda Friends Meeting. Many also mentioned the sense of mutual support, friendship, and acceptance they experience in the community. Quite a few spoke or wrote about the power of Quaker worship, how sacred silence can deepen our connection to the Light, the way the "luminous" can arise in times of deep worship, how they feel nurtured by the time for quiet and for reflection, and the power and depth of the vocal ministry. Many also mentioned the connection and support experienced in committees and other small group settings, the flexibility of the Meeting in continuing to make the Meetings for Worship hybrid, the draw of Quaker faith and testimonies, and the benefits of the First Day School and the availability of childcare. Several mentioned the importance of the Collective Journey, Experiment with Light sessions, the book group focused on See No Stranger, Wednesday evening worship, and the world religions class.

While most of the responses were very positive, there were also expressions of distress. Several acknowledged anguish about the Gaza/Israel situation, but noted that frequent messages and calls to action can begin to feel more political and less spiritual. One friend commented that there has usually been a balance at BFM between the transcendence of the Spirit and engagement with the world, but this has seemed out of balance recently, and he finds that rather than feel spiritually nurtured by Meetings for Worship, he needs to recover from them. Several respondents mentioned that they had withdrawn from the BFM listserv because its messages have largely focused on political issues recently.

Others point out that what is going on in the world calls us to respond from our Quaker faith and testimonies. Quakers have always had both the prophetic element (of the prophets calling out injustice) and the mystical element (of turning inward for Light and guidance). One friend offered: “Spirit is alive where hearts are lifted, in pain and joy, and not drowned out by spiritualizing.” Another friend said, “When we can deal with death and love and struggle and birth all in the same Meeting, it is a sign that we are healthy,” and “it is better to struggle than to not care.”

For some friends, frustrations with the Meeting are serious - a couple of Friends said they wished to withdraw temporarily from the Meeting. These dynamics deserve the Meeting’s continuing attention and care.

On hybrid Meeting for Worship, one respondent who lives out of the area noted that, ironically, after feeling very connected to BFM via Zoom through the first couple of years of the pandemic, he feels less connection now that so many friends are back to Meeting in person; he can see the sense of a vibrant community, and feels the loss of not connecting with it.

Query 2 - Have you had opportunities to share your spiritual gifts with the Meeting? Has your involvement brought you moments of joy or satisfaction?

Many noted moments of joy and satisfaction. Friends commented that when they were led to speak in a Meeting for Worship, it felt very meaningful, and it meant a great deal to them when others let them know their message was helpful.

Many respondents expressed great joy and satisfaction by being able to make contributions through committee work. One noted that the structure of a Monthly Meeting means that friends are called to do things they might not have thought themselves capable of doing, and then they grow with the challenge. In a similar vein, another said, “Everything we do for the community is an opportunity for growth; we stretch for the community.” One friend noted a quote from a Quaker of the past: “Live up to the light thou hast, and more will be granted thee.”

Another friend noted that she is glad to share her love of humanity, her desire for peace and justice everywhere, and her empathy for others. Several respondents said they felt gratified by being able to offer, organize, or participate in the variety of activities that bring people at BFM together to reflect on spiritual topics, such as forums, a book group, classes, study groups, and other Quaker education settings.

Query 3 - How do you bring Quaker insights, inspiration, and practices into your daily life outside the Meeting?

Many respondents noted how important certain tenets of Quaker faith and practice are to them as they interact with the world at large. These have to do with: finding the Light of God in others, even (and especially) in trying circumstances; listening deeply; being patient and seasoning concerns; advocating for peace and justice, and practicing simplicity. The Quaker testimonies and faith have helped many in our Meeting feel they can act with greater integrity and love out in

the world. At the same time, one respondent noted it can be hard to bring Quaker sensibilities to work situations where people are unfamiliar with them, and another said it was hard to see that of God in certain people in the public sphere.

Query 4 - How do you feel about Bethesda Friends Meeting's work to cultivate peace and justice within and beyond our Meeting?

Friends expressed positive feelings about our support of various organizations and causes that promote peace and social justice (including Action in Montgomery, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Ramallah Friends School, and other Quaker and non-Quaker organizations); the work by the Peace and Social Justice Committee on reproductive rights; the work of the Collective Journey; and the process BFM engaged in to create the Minute on the situation in the Middle East. Regarding the development of the Minute, several friends noted that it was a struggle, but the process allowed many opportunities for people to participate and be heard; many applauded the dedicated work of those who stewarded that process, and noted that we found a way to speak to the issue in a manner the Meeting could unite around. However, another respondent saw the process differently, as a rushed negotiation and not spirit-led.

There were a number of comments about how we need to find ways to truly listen, and to understand that people inevitably bring different perspectives, different backgrounds, and different temperaments to such complex issues. One friend hopes we can have a deeper discussion about how we respond to such terrible situations – what did Christ say and how did He respond to violence? What did Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and the Buddha say about this? There are women, too, whose lives and work we could learn from: Elise Boulding, Malala Yousafzai, and Tara Brach are among some of the names mentioned by others. We might also look into the work of the Parents' Circle (a group of Israeli and Palestinian parents who have lost children in the conflict and work together for peace and reconciliation).

In response to this question, we also heard very strongly stated concerns about polarization and division in our Meeting. How can we have such discussions with less debating and insisting? It is inevitable that such a fraught and complex issue will bring out differences; how can we bridge them, and care for one another as a spiritual community despite differences? Several saw the struggle as positive, a way to grow. One said “Tension can be creative if we allow it to be. We can't remain static and hope to thrive as a Meeting.”

Friends expressed appreciation that the Pastoral Care Committee and the Peace and Social Justice Committee engaged in a process to address hurts that came about during the development of the Minute. This was seen as an example of facing struggle and conflict rather than running away from it. Some wondered if we need some community-building activities to help us all reconnect, and to help re-build trust and love.

Issues for Further Consideration

We on Ministry and Worship deeply appreciate the many heart-felt, honest, searching responses we received from our community. The input gave us a sense of how vibrant our community is.

Based on our discussions, we are led to share some questions for the Meeting's consideration:

- Quakers have a long tradition of seeking inner guidance and the mystical experience of connecting with the Light. Quakers also have long embraced the practice of calling out injustice and acting upon these concerns. What is the relationship we seek between these two strands? Can we find ways to support those among us for whom one strand is more compelling than the other?
- Should the Meeting focus on intentional community-building experiences that can bring people together and work to reinforce trust and connection? Can we provide more opportunities to get to know each other as we work, play, eat and laugh together?
- Are there ways we can build our emotional capacity and skills so that we are better able to deal with difficult issues with love, patience, and trust?
- Is there interest in more adult religious education offerings on Quaker faith and practices?

2024 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

Blacksburg Friends Meeting

- **What are the best practices of your meeting's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business (MfWCB) that you could share with other meetings? In what way do you think your MfWCB falls short?**
 - **Best Practices:** We like the following things about the conduct of our Meeting for Business. First, it is not an open-ended conversation nor is it a chat. Second, Clerk asks us to raise a hand to be recognized which allows her to be sure many voices are included. Third, we joke around a bit which is pleasant. Finally, our Clerk gives us guidelines before we start to help folks remember what we're doing, be respectful of others, do what is best for our Meeting, etc.
 - **Falls Short:** We think we could improve upon the following aspects of our Meeting for Business. First, reading the agenda ahead of time and being prepared to discuss so we could move more rapidly through things and be more decisive. We think this would lead to fewer seat of the pants responses. Second, monitoring our emotional response to other people's comments could be done better. Third, Minutes could be produced and drafts sent out closer to the Meeting when they occurred so that we all could remember more clearly what took place and offer improvements accordingly. We need to be more comfortable with letting go of things we as a Meeting do not have to deal with. We are still growing into our committee structure of delegating Meeting decisions and tasks to committees.
- **The whole world seems at war now. How does the Quaker peace testimony live in your meeting? How do your members practice the peace testimony?** Several members attend the Peace Vigil at the Post Office on First Fridays. Individual members talked with others about topics such as guns and we attended a March for Our Lives rally. We joined in solidarity with our Jewish community when an antisemitic saying was painted on their property. We attended a service reaching out to the Jewish community, and several members joined an interfaith book discussion group that is ongoing. We hosted Wayne Finegar from Quaker House and he spoke about Fort Liberty and their soldiers. We also hosted Odeliya Matter from FCNL who gave a talk about Gaza and Israel in October shortly after the Hamas attack. We had a Sensitive Topics Discussion on Gaza and Israel in December 2023. Several members did their own research on the history of the Middle East and shared their findings. We joined with the Minute from Peace and Social Concerns Committee of Baltimore Yearly Meeting and communicated with FCNL about that act.
- **Does your meeting suffer the arrogance of certainty? For example, does your meeting have subtle prejudices for those unlike them.** We've done some work in understanding ourselves. We have been talking more to each other through Adult Ed and Sensitive Topics Conversations. We are learning more about ourselves and getting beyond the pleasantries on First Day. We have had an opportunity to talk amongst ourselves about who we are and how to present ourselves to others. We were invited to an interfaith gathering to present on Quakerism in Tazewell, VA. We have lost a few attenders due to a discomfort with some of our

interpretations of Christianity and held an Adult Ed on the ways Quakers have embraced Christianity as well as Universalism.

- **Tell how your meeting's walk with Spirit informs our understanding of racism and how you are meant to live?** We had a Sensitive Topics Discussion about reparations. Several of our members attend the local Dialogue on Race group, and we Quakers have been a solid presence supporting the local Juneteenth celebration and continue participation in the Christiansburg Institute's efforts and functions. A handful of us are also attending the NAACP programs (Politics and Religion, Martin Luther King Memorial).

Spiritual State of Meeting, Carlisle (PA) Quaker Meeting, 02-25-2024

Carlisle Friends met at rise of meeting for worship on Sunday, February 25, 2024, to consider Spiritual State of the Meeting (SOM) queries from Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM). Ten Friends participated: Christy Hoover, Nate Jefferson, Andy Hoover, Ruth Kovacs, Hal Kuhns, Ron Lewellen, Jen McDuffie, Alan Warner, Don Kovacs (Clerk) and Fred Baldwin (Recording Clerk).

As suggested by the Clerk, participants considered all four BYM queries in a discussion that often moved back-and-forth across all topics. To facilitate BYM's review, these notes follow the suggested BYM format. They do not necessarily reflect the order in which the comments were made during the course of a discussion of about an hour.

- 1) *What are best practices of your meeting's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business that you could share with other meetings? In what way do you think your MfWCB falls short?*

In general, the assessment was positive. Initial comments focused on our weekly meetings for worship, and Friends expressed gratitude for ministry on a wide range of topics. The quality of silence seems good. An occasional hour spent entirely in silence is evidence that no one feels a compulsion to speak.

One Friend commented that messages spoken in the past year continue to affect his conduct. Another notes that she often makes a journal entry after some especially rich meeting for worship.

In response to one comment that meetings for business often focus on conventional "business" concerns (e.g., proposed improvements to our meetinghouse), it was pointed out that recent discussions have included follow-up on racial justice initiatives and, most recently, attempts to discern the right response to the war between Hamas and Israel.

- 2) *The whole world seems at war now. How does the Quaker peace testimony live in your meeting? How do your members practice the peace testimony?*

A Friend who has only recently begun regular attendance here noted that in her former meeting the so-called "SPICES" (Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship) were explicitly cited as important guidance in decision-making. She noted her impression that this is not routinely the case here.

Friends agreed that her impression is generally accurate. It was suggested that we value relationships over unity, especially where many controversial issues are concerned. We are aware that our culture of mutual forbearance can be both a

strength and a weakness. It is good for the meeting that minority views can be heard. Conversely, this culture tends to weaken an incentive to labor with an issue until we find unity on proposed action.

3. Does your meeting suffer the arrogance of certainty? For example, does your meeting have subtle prejudices for those unlike them?

We did not address this query explicitly. If the intended focus was “racial prejudice,” the main thrust of our comments would be “No.” If another focus was intended (e.g., political orthodoxy), the response might be less confident.

One Friend noted that, as a counselor, he often hears clients distinguish between “religion” and “spiritual values.” We are most likely to appeal to “spiritual seekers.”

4. Tell how your meeting’s walk with Spirit informs your understanding of racism and how you are meant to live. Describe specific ways your meeting works to become an anti-racist and justice-seeking community.

Several Friends mentioned our delight that a recent program on the Underground Railroad filled our meetinghouse to its “standing room only” limit and attracted a large number of African American neighbors – roughly 25% of the more than 80 people who attended. (A follow-up program, led by a Black film producer, is being planned for later this spring.)

A Friend commented that this event was a “big deal” for us – eye-opening evidence that we can connect to the community to the extent of filling our building. Our involvement with friends in Mt. Holly Springs (a small nearby community) who are seeking to restore a historically Black church associated with the Underground Railroad has helped that group make the case for additional funding from a state agency. Another Friend said that he received questions about Quakers (e.g., “Why is there no pulpit in your church building?” “Why do the benches face either other?”) that gave him an opportunity to explain Quaker worship to a number of community members.

Another Friend found it instructive to compare community response to the Underground Railroad program with a previous attempt (several years ago) to introduce Quaker faith and practice to the community under the heading “Quaker Quest.” Quaker Quest required a large effort that resulted in almost no local interest – probably, a Friend suggested, because its focus was self-centered.

Still another Friend drew a sharp distinction between local-level and national-level action. He believes that the former is valuable and often productive, but that the latter is likely to be pointless. All others who spoke to this point disagreed. They believe that, while the wider effects of local action may be unpredictable, there is ample evidence that what may begin as a local event can expand rapidly. A recent specific instance cited is a shift in public opinion (and hence national political policy options) on the appropriateness of U.S. military aid to Israel – a shift caused in large part by numerous local demonstrations mounted by university students and various interest groups. Still another Friend mentioned that, at a recent lecture by a distinguished African American scholar emphasized the value of local action.

As the meeting neared its end, our clerk commented that Faith into Action (our re-thought version of “Peace and Social Concerns”) has met monthly for more than three years now – our only committee that meets even nearly so often.

At least two Friends commented that they have benefitted from frequent participation in BYM’s Spiritual Formation Zoom sessions. Some of us have been active participants in Moving Circles, a local group with a strong focus on interracial activities.

Another noted that a picnic this summer at Amethyst Retreat Center, Duncannon, PA, was both enjoyable and a valuable way to deepen friendships. [Our clerk is one of the board members of Amethyst.]

Our clerk of Ministry and Counsel noted that her committee held two clearness committees during 2023 – one for a new member (welcomed into membership) and the other addressing a personal concern.

Addendum: Reflecting after the discussion on what we might have to offer other meetings, our clerk noted that we take for granted what may be a highly unusual practice: the weekly production of a bulletin placed on our benches at all Sunday-morning services. A bulletin consists of four half-page sections that include inspirational quotations, news items (coming events across the community) and meeting-specific information (e.g. names of officers). Its inspirational material often serves as stimulus to spoken ministry, and its factual material eliminates almost any need for tedious and time-consuming announcements at rise of meetings for worship.

2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

for Charlottesville Monthly Meeting

Final SSoM, May 2024

Our Meeting's Ministry & Worship committee met with many Friends in February and March 2024 to share opinions and insights on our Spiritual State. Our Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business approved this Report in May, 2024.

During 2023, our Meeting offered three opportunities for Worship each First Day. At 8:30am, there was an in-person meeting in the meetinghouse, and a meeting online. At 11:00am, "later" meeting in-person convened with a First Day school program available for children. Between early and later worships, a "Connections Hour" was held for examination of various topics of social and community concern. Business Meetings were held monthly.

Meetings for Worship Our meeting has been surprisingly sturdy under the adversity of the times. We profess that there is a Spirit, a mysterious something within and beyond us, that has a draw on each person. We sit in silence "still souls on either side", to listen together for what Divine inspiration may come. Friends spoke of the Meeting as a "faith family", a blessing, a wonderful collection of sojourners. Spoken ministry has brought both encouragement and challenge to persevere even amid feelings of horror and helplessness evoked by the catastrophe of ongoing war in the world.

Concern was voiced regarding the number of compelling afterthoughts spoken at rise of meeting, instead of as spoken ministry during worship. There is a hope that if Friends feel courage to speak into the silence earlier, messages may season more fully. The task of rising Worship is now shared among volunteers.

As we emerge from the lonely places in which we nested during covid times, there may be a tentativeness and fear. This is not just of becoming sick, but of finding ways to be bold, to allow ourselves to be known to one another, and also to join together as a community in witness, service, and social change leadings.

Coming back together Spiritual support is available in many forms. Even through the forced introversion of covid times, Friends have not let go of each other. We miss cherished Friends who have died, who no longer attend, or who don't attend as regularly. There now is a meaningful friendly circle on care at end of life.

Friends observe that attendance at early and later worships has increased, yet not to pre-pandemic numbers.

There is a sense that the Meeting is making a “come-back” from a more dormant time during covid isolation. We are grateful for the energy gained by new attenders and some younger families who are very active, and who enrich our community life. We continue to receive a steady stream of visitors as we are in a university town. We are here for them, and they often say they liked experiencing their time with us.

The role of technology in our Meeting community continues to present challenges, and the learning curve has sometimes been steep. Both our online and in person Meetings for Worship continue to draw many Friends to attend. At present CFM has embraced the use of hybrid Meetings for Business and for some of our Connections programs, but not Meetings for Worship. The Meeting has invested in a computer, a large screen and other technology for the Meeting Room, and we are in the process of learning how and when to use this hybrid format to best strengthen our bonds of community.

Within our Meeting Community Friends have joyfully been creating more opportunities for coming together through increased in-person social gatherings in the meetinghouse, committee work, Friendly Circles, Friday evening gatherings, singing, and potlucks. The Program committee held a number of well-attended Connections events, including those with a focus on Quaker history, land acknowledgement, and reparations which grew out of the concerns of individual Friends and work in Friendly circles. The Religious Education Committee did an extraordinary job with the children’s program; Friends noted that the RE units on Native Americans, and a creative Christmas pageant, were especially enriching. An anti-racism query is now read quarterly. We approved a land acknowledgement statement for the land of our Meeting House property. The statement acknowledges the land as historically on the territory of the Native American people called the Monacan. Later, this land was part of the Rosehill Plantation, where people were enslaved.

The BYM camping program is a vital anchor for young Friends in our meeting. We affirm the ministry of camp available for children.

Service and Leadings Friends participated in important outreach activities. Friends worked on committees and in their vocations, anchored by a Spirit that comes from worship. We supported a leading to hold an ice cream social for folks in our neighborhood. Friends organized several responses to the war in Gaza. First, a special meeting for worship was held. Then a statement was written, approved by Business Meeting, and sent to BYM, calling for the United States to press for a

ceasefire. Finally, Friends participated in organizing a candlelight vigil for peace, which was attended by about 75 people, including many individuals beyond Charlottesville Friends.

Friends desire to share our resources and care for others. The Meeting continues to support a Congolese refugee family. During 2023, our meeting assisted with meals preparation for unhoused women with the local non-profit PACEM *People and Congregations Engaged in Ministry*. This ministry provides nighttime shelter and meals in buildings of faith communities during the cold weather. We look forward to again opening our own meetinghouse for this purpose in 2024.

Finding Way Opening Charlottesville Friends engage spiritual searching regarding the concern of our own privilege in a society with steep inequalities. We seek way open to counter militarism and complicity in funding destruction. Our Meeting is held together by Quaker practices, Friendly bonds, and corporate spiritual seeking in this time and place.

DEER CREEK FRIENDS MEETING
SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE MEETING
MARCH, 2024

Deer Creek Friends Meeting is a small and cherished weekly Meeting in rural Darlington, MD. Above all, there is a deep and present spirituality enveloping the Meeting that comes from God, one another and the community. God is truly present in our silent and spoken words, emanating from adult lessons that are thought-provoking, inspirational, and shared with love.

The members of DCFM are welcoming and accepting of visitors and new attendees. We would like our membership to grow and would be glad of more young families with children. We reach out to the community in various ways. Our annual Blueberry Festival is much anticipated and appreciated, with all proceeds going directly back to the community, through donations to among others, Darlington Elementary School, Twice Blessed Thrift Shop and Darlington Volunteer Fire Department. To friends more distant, we give to Friends School, CharHope (an addictions recovery facility), Doctors Without Borders, and UNICEF for example.

Meetings with a Concern for Business are a reflection of our overall regard for one another. A range of issues is addressed with a serious but uncritical intent. We saw progress on the issue of safety, putting in place a plan for immediate security and prompting members to attend a program for assessing and deescalation of a mental health crisis. Decisions arrived at from business meetings are implemented, if not immediately, in due course. The Trustees have authorize many positive improvements on the building, such as new windows and doors, building repairs and maintenance.

DCFM is a homogeneous Meeting. We take the Peace Testimony to heart, taking it outside the the Meeting House and practicing it daily. Our outdoor banner urges "Seek peace and pursue it." We have a reciprocal relationship with Hosanna AME Church, supporting their efforts to restore the Hassana School Museum and as sponsors their Juneteenth

celebrations. If subtle prejudices exist, as they do in all of us, it is not as a group.

We are striving to understand the history of racism and practice anti-racism in our daily lives. An adult First Day lesson on the Underground Railroad, which has many sites in our area, helped us better understand the lives and sufferings those who came before us.

DCFM is a small Meeting with a devoted core membership who are consistently present for First Day worship and who demonstrate good will and love for all.

2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Dunnings Creek Monthly Meeting

2023 has been a year for Dunnings Creek to rest, reflect and regain some balance after some challenging discord and questioning of who we are. It has been a year of catching our breath, and learning to be better listeners, and more tender with each other.

Quaker Process doesn't always come easily. It is an ongoing learning experience that can be challenging, but the clerk has been diligent in carrying on with the process. Minutes approved in real time have been most beneficial. We realize that this is a forever process, made better by going more slowly, allowing time to understand which enables us to handle issues more fully.

Our *Still Listening Series* has brought our community together, giving us the chance to learn more deeply who we are. This includes our small gestures of kindness to our immediate neighborhood. It may have a ripple effect – who knows?

The world events have given us an opportunity to learn to listen to F(f)riends and family who may have different ideas about the Peace Testimony. How do we go about listening with compassion and without judgment? How do we find our way without choosing sides? Friends ask, "Why is there so much outrage over the Israel/Palestinian conflict when there are so many other violent and dehumanizing conflicts already happening in our world?"

We asked ourselves about the arrogance of certainty. Friends asked, "Doesn't everybody have subtle prejudices, and sometimes not so subtle?" When there are difficult discussions, it is easier to NOT see "that of God" in others. We have been making an effort to notice the prejudices we see in ourselves. One Friend reminded us that we might take care and beware of the "holier than thou" trap when in meeting we talk of other religious groups. It would be good to tenderly alert that to each other when we see it. A sense of humor is a priceless gem.

Here in rural Pennsylvania, we live in an area that is about 98% White. That said, we have been making the effort to educate ourselves and to be open. In the past we have hosted our *Still Listening Series*, invited musicians from other countries and contacted friends from other religious groups so that we may have fellowship and understanding. Our prejudices come from what we don't know.

One Friend pointed out that many times this all comes down to the word "are". . . Those people are.... These people are.... "Are" is like an equal sign and can be a broad stroke that leads to misunderstanding. Do we use the word "are" in our meeting? Sometimes. This is an invitation for explanation, understanding and awareness.

One Friends shared," Quakerism is hard for me, because you have to work. The queries sometimes seem that they don't really apply to me, but when you really delve into them, they do."

We rejoice in the realization that we agree to listen and support each other in this journey that we all are on.

Frederick Friends Meeting, Report on the Spiritual State of the Meeting Delivered Spring 2024

Queries from Baltimore Yearly Meeting, Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee

1. What are best practices of your meeting's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business (MfWCB) that you could share with other meetings? In what way do you think your MfWCB falls short?
2. The whole world seems at war now. How does the Quaker peace testimony live in your meeting? How do your members practice the peace testimony?
3. Does your meeting suffer the arrogance of certainty? For example, does your meeting have subtle prejudices for those unlike them?
4. Tell how your meeting's walk with Spirit informs our understanding of racism and how you are meant to live?

For the Addendum:

Describe specific ways your meeting works to become an anti-racist and justice-seeking community.

Queries from Frederick Friends Meeting

What part of meeting speaks to you? What is meeting doing well? Is there anything we can improve? What draws you to meeting?

We held two listening and discernment sessions to guide our responses to the queries regarding the spiritual state of the meeting over the last year. Provided below are general observations that were made regarding the spiritual state of the meeting, followed by specific comments on each of the queries.

General Observations:

Very prevalent in 2023 was a tenderness of spirit among the community when dealing with each other and others. There was also a community wide deepening of spirit in 2023. This can be attributed to friends sitting in spirit together in ways additional to MFW on Sunday. There is Wednesday evening worship sharing and extended worship on Sunday before meeting, and the book groups. Attending MFW and Wednesday evening worship sharing increases one's ability to see light in the eyes of others, informs individual leading and illuminates individual capabilities and doubts.

With an appreciation of Quakerism and the fact that things are done in Spirit, in response to all the queries, there could be more spirit-led basis for action. Clerks of any meetings might pause and ask where is the spirit in this? For example, how does this relate to a spiritual transformation to bring us to a place that takes away any occasion for conflict or war? It is an internal problem of getting to a place where we are living from the spirit.

One commenter observed that it has been wonderful as part of many committees to see light brought out and used to guide the committees. They do this from a quiet place.

Similarly wonderful is the number of people coming to MFW, and seeing that they are happy and coming back.

There was an expressed wish for more information on the role and functions of committees; we could do a better job communicating about committees. It would be helpful to have committees state their hopes and goals.

Comments on Specific Queries:

BYM Queries

Query 1 from BYM regarding Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business

The approach to MFWCB has been without an opinion on the outcome. It is important to approach MFWCB with an openness to Spirit, trusting that the body will come to the right decision and action.

It had been suggested at one time that all should read reports beforehand so that they do not need to be read during MFWCB – thereby having a consent agenda to free up time. But here, people like hearing the reports read into the meeting and that is our practice.

While the reading of queries on antiracism at the beginning of MFWCB are good, they don't always meld with the business agenda. For another commenter, the queries as worded have little meaning, while the concept of antiracism itself is very important. Perhaps examples would augment the meaning of the queries.

It would be good if we could have more people come to MFWCB so that we could better stand in unity and have a common vision specific to Frederick Friends Meeting.

One person noted they were impressed with a) the hybrid/Zoom format for MFWCB, with a separate computer for the clerk to help integrate people on Zoom and b) that the Clerk sought a support committee for guidance in clerking, with people who complement her gifts.

One of the things that is working for our MFWCB is that we are getting better at listening instead of sharing.

Query 2 from BYM regarding the Quaker peace testimony

There has been guidance on the conflict in Gaza from FCNL and AFSC, and these communications have been meaningful along with the concept of peacekeeping. Nonetheless, there hasn't been guidance from our Meeting as a whole. The email discussion on the Meeting's discussion listserv group reached a level of belligerence in tone. This has been disappointing and there is a wish that we could do better. One commenter wished for a way to express this disappointment to see what could be done.

Quakerism beliefs and practices are vital to the United States and world today and the life of our planet and the continuation of our species. We should let people know we are here and what we believe. We are too reticent to show our feelings and beliefs. We should do more to share our gifts.

Regarding the comment about belligerence in the email discussion forum there should have been a response. There should never be belligerence. We could reflect on putting more energy into supporting people one on one so that there is a safe space to state beliefs. {By way of explanation, members of the Ministry and Counsel Committee and other individual members do try to reach out one on one to facilitate building friendship and community.}

Another commenter observed that the forum on the email discussion group provided room to allow people to start analyzing with their head (who did what) and moving to their heart (what needs to happen). It allowed F/friends to talk things out and helped them to take part in the discussion, even though it distressed others.

One commenter observed that George Fox didn't just say war is wrong, but went straight to the heart of the matter and lived in that virtue that took away all occasions for war. The statement speaks not to an external calling, but an inward calling to build a spiritual practice to make every action spirit-led. The peace testimony then becomes a natural expression of the spiritual state of being.

While the BYM queries talk about the world of strife, it seems over the past year there have been many members and attenders of our meeting that have had personal strife. Having the energy and the numbers to take care of each other and to follow the leadings of outward spiritual action in the greater community has brought a heavy tension and perhaps a heavy weight of the spirit.

A number of members and attenders attended the Peace Vigil for Israel and Palestine in Baker Park in the fall of 2023, joining others from the community. Additionally, newcomers have seen the strength of some individuals in the community in their actions around the peace testimony.

Query 3 from BYM on the arrogance of certainty

Regarding an arrogance of certainty, it was observed that there can be such arrogance, not necessarily racial in nature, but within the everyday workings of meeting, between members and non members and between people from other yearly meetings looking askance at BYM processes.

How do we make intentional space when our sense of unity is challenged and there is an opportunity to learn and grow and challenge our own individual arrogance of certainty? Unity is not always perfect or always agreement. How do we create an intentional space outside of MFWCB, perhaps in a called meeting for worship to help us find our way forward in action and discernment?

Query 4 and Addendum from BYM on racism

The change group's ("Becoming We") readings on racism and potential solutions have been very meaningful. The group addresses the structures that support privilege. It has provided a learning experience and source of some hope regarding how we break down those prejudicial structures.

Queries from FFM

Many of the comments on the FFM queries spoke to what draws people to FFM.

Several commenters positively noted the Wednesday worship sharing, as well as other extra curricular activities (such as singing Sunday), as drawing them to meeting. In the Wednesday worship sharing group, attenders can learn how to listen and come to accept that others are sharing who they are. The light grows as people speak and can change one's view of what has been read into the worship sharing. As silent worship in MFW can be intimidating and misunderstood, especially for newcomers, other engaging activities are beneficial in drawing new attenders.

It was observed that our community is able to look beyond superficial or frivolous differences between people, that is, to go beyond our prejudices or internal biases, and see the core of the individual. We have a long way to go but we are doing much better. Our meeting is seeing more with our hearts and with love, appreciating that our differences enrich us even when they challenge us. The work continues.

Along these lines, several comments were directed at the testimony that there is that of God in everyone. The concept of "otherism" can be viewed as not seeing that of God in everyone and encompasses having prejudices or biases based on differences of varying kinds: homelessness, mental illness, differences in color, culture, etc. Personal stories and vocal ministry provide us with an opportunity to see the light in others. Seeing that of God in everyone can be difficult and messy. Several newcomers have observed that FFM is "walking the walk" of this testimony. It was observed that it was not just seeing God in everyone, but that everyone is sharing God.

Other comments spoke to the sense of community: worshiping together in a gathered meeting, and over changes to the makeup of that meeting. It is especially joyous when newcomers feel comfortable speaking. What makes the silence valuable is the company of other people, that it is a shared silence. Others spoke to the inviting energy of FFM, inviting newcomers to get involved.

Regarding verbal ministry it is important to pay attention to the quality of vocal ministry – to pay attention to how the body is feeling, to discern if a message is for everyone, to pray the message into meeting before speaking and to be cautious regarding stories (sometimes they are needed for context).

Friends Meeting of Washington

The Spiritual State of the Meeting March 2024

“The Friends Meeting of Washington (FMW) is a vibrant community that cultivates Quakerism as a nutrient spiritual practice, supports the development of our young people and works effectively to live our Quaker values in the world.”

To help prepare this report, FMW recently collected 108 survey responses from members and attenders. These included responses to queries about the spiritual state of our meeting and actions we might take to become an ever more welcoming, spiritually supportive, and anti-racist religious community (some of which are included in this report). About half of the respondents were members (of FMW or another meeting) and half were regular attenders. Half were under 60 years old; and about one-third were under the age of forty. Ours is a multigenerational meeting that is increasing in size and vitality. And we are a meeting where many come from other religious backgrounds, seeking spiritual growth and/or a faith community devoted to progressive social action. Ours is a busy meeting with many blessings and challenges as we have opened our facilities to the wider community and as we strive to provide seekers with opportunities to understand and engage more deeply with Quaker faith and practice.

“Sunday Worship is one of the most supportive foundations of my spiritual development.” I leave Meeting feeling enriched. I appreciate thought provoking queries and sharings offered by members.” “I stepped back from attending because persistent inflammatory ‘messages’ were being delivered at nearly every meeting...[I needed] a space where I could calmly recenter and recharge.”
“FMW could do more to guide Friends toward a more spirit-led worship.”
“Sometimes [there is] an emphasis on activism towards the outside world and less focus on supporting individual spiritual development or community development...the activism of developing one’s spiritual life and the [spiritual] life of the community is...as important [as] achieving a political agenda.”

In addition to occasional Meetings for special concerns, FMW convenes five weekly Meetings for Worship, each with its own character, and two of which are available for remote participation. In pleasant weather, our 10:30 a.m. First Day Meeting convenes in two locations - the meeting room and the garden. Ninety percent of the survey respondents attend one of our five meetings regularly and over 80% of the respondents consider FMW their nurturing Spiritual Home.

Overall, our members and attenders expressed appreciation for the spiritual foundation FMW provides. For some, however, there is a heartfelt concern that some shared messages (particularly at our 10:30 a.m. First Day Meeting) seem more appropriate for personal reflection or more like “social media feeds” rather than Spirit-led messages compelled out of silent listening for the Voice within. It is not surprising that in a city

which attracts compassionate, politically active individuals and within a faith that welcomes all seekers

regardless of personal struggles, some messages have caused this concern. Therefore, recognizing that everyone has that of God within and that we are fortunate to have such a diverse and socially engaged community, FMW offers many opportunities for seekers and newcomers to learn about Quaker beliefs, testimonies, practices and history, in part to help guide our individual worship and relationships among ourselves. These opportunities for deep spiritual learning have blossomed during 2023, and we anticipate their continued enthusiastic growth to enhance FMW's spiritual practice and wellbeing.

*“Can we be more discerning...interrogating the roots and manifestations of racism, rather than associating racism immediately with the color of one's skin?”
“Instead of ‘anti-racism’ I urge that we seek out and create hands-on events and ‘projects’ in which WE EACH...do things WITH rather than just FOR Washingtonians ‘of color’. “...for Quakers seeking justice it is time ...to work from personal peace rather than provoking and seeking to leverage guilt...humbly doing good.” “I love the sense of a growing and deepening community. I love the intergenerational mix. I also appreciate that [compared to when I started attending] more people of color are finding nourishment in our community.”*

Over the last year, and to some degree prior to that, many individuals and groups in FMW have been engaged in anti-racism work through spiritual reflection and outward action. This effort requires continuous attention, and we understand that actions, attitudes and the spiritual reflection that concerns our testimony for racial equality are inherent in our spiritual condition. Resources from BYM and FGC have been made available to our community and a Change Group for Racial Equity has been active for almost a decade. Through this group, and with some patient, honest leadership from Black members of our community, there have been workshops, study sessions, a Meeting-wide audit, a query development process, and the formation of an anti-racist spiritual friendship group where Friends can deeply consider their internalized racism within a loving spiritual community. FMW also has strengthened its participation in the Washington Interfaith Network, a Black-led, multi-faith, multi-racial organization working to increase equity in housing, legal aid, public safety, violence reduction and other areas of social inequity within our city. Although the call to become an anti-racist Meeting does not speak to all in our community, it has become a core concern for our Meeting as a whole, nurtured under the care of our Committee on Ministry and Worship.

“[At] FMW there is always a little something for everyone. Ranging from Friendly Bible study, social justice activities, volunteer [service] work and opportunities to connect with other Friends or the greater D.C. area...all under the care of our Meeting.” “It is important that we commune together intergenerationally; [and that] we take part in spiritual friendship groups, the Film Club and other small groups where we can discuss how people enact their beliefs in real life.” “[The

sharing and rental of our physical spaces] should be thought of as an extension of our mission. We should celebrate that our building provides meeting space for worthy and often prominent non-profits...and many individuals and couples [that use] our spaces to mark their most memorable and important life experiences.”

In their responses to the queries, FMW members and attenders expressed a deep yearning for more opportunities to learn about the practices and beliefs of Friends and to share spiritual journeys within the community. These hopes are being addressed by many individuals and committees as initiatives like “Quakerism 101”, “Quakerism 201”, and “A Deeper Dive into Quakerism” help introduce and extend individuals’ understanding and practice of our faith. For our youngest community members, we provide childcare and robust First Day School programs designed for our youngest, pre-teen, and teen community members. Emerging from the pandemic, our meeting has been challenged to find a sufficient number and mix of individuals led to engage in child-related activities. As more are led to this deeply rewarding service, many hope for a return to weekly programming without overburdening our engaged committees, clerks, teachers and care providers.

In addition, for over 20% of our FMW respondents, social justice and the pursuit of peace are a primary manifestation of their spiritual life as Friends. These concerns have included violence in the Middle East, Ukraine, and elsewhere, as well as environmental justice issues, particularly in our city and region.

Keeping in mind that about 40% of the survey respondents stated that FMW is their “primary support community” or their “homebase for social activities”, community-nurturing initiatives have thrived and include an active Young Adult Friends group, “a second cup of coffee” (post-worship sharing sessions), film club, Friendly Beekeepers, fiber parties, and board game days. Many (including our children) are involved with and appreciate efforts to support our most-vulnerable neighbors, such as the Backpack Project and the Grate Patrol. In addition, our being able to rent out our beautifully renovated and accessible rooms and gardens has enabled FMW to concretely demonstrate the inclusiveness and spiritual values of our faith to many non-Quakers. This joy of being able to share our spaces as a manifestation of our welcoming faith is tempered by ongoing concerns about our ability to meet renovation-associated debt obligations. FMW Friends are struggling to maintain faith that way will open for community members to assure the long-term financial viability of our physical facilities while prioritizing our spiritual values and without over obligating future generations.

“My hope is that FMW can continue to be a bedrock for Quaker values for generations to come. By having an active and present Quaker Community...we have more than a past and are focused on the future.”

During 2023, FMW lost several beloved elders who greatly contributed to the spiritual wellbeing of our Meeting. These Friends are sorely missed but our faith and the reality of our vibrant meeting reassure us that the incoming tide of middle-aged and younger

Friends bring comparable Spirit-led gifts to our community. In addition, we have been blessed by the presence of a growing number of newborns and babies, whom we have welcomed into the community through special Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Welcoming. We struggle to meet our challenges, as all communities do, but our beliefs and the strength of our spiritual bonds provide us with a solid foundation even in these very precarious times.

Gettysburg Monthly Meeting focused on our meeting space to convey our thoughts on the spiritual state of the Meeting.

Some excerpts:

There are many visual enhancements that greet you at Gettysburg Monthly Meeting, offering a welcoming space for our silent worship, including the simple mobile welcome sign we put outside the door.

I am drawn to our space. I appreciate my sense of the others in our small meeting gathered in a circle. The coziness and connectedness grounds me. Then I am aware of the spaciousness above and surrounding our gathering, which allows me to breathe deeply, settling in to silence and listening for the Spirit.

The intimacy and silence of the space allows for time to hear, allowing space to reflect on what's been happening in one's life or the future or just be conscious of one's thoughts. Sharing the silence of Meeting is a space where a spiritual experience can happen.

I can look into the silence trying to see the Light, leaving room for God to speak, trying to approach the unknowable, the incomprehensible, an abstraction of the Light, of the truth of God.

The first thing I see as I settle in is the stained glass windows, which give me a sense of calm and peace. The owls, the grapes, the colors give me something to focus on, to help center me for worship.

It is our tradition at the "rise" of Meeting to rise and hold hands around the table which is usually in the center of our space. We use this time for afterthoughts (since our worship is usually silent, this is important) and time to check in with one another and our friends and family. In this time we have become Friends and friends, becoming closer to each other and the Spirit within us. We are reliant on one another and together we form a community.

I remember the evolution of Gettysburg Monthly Meeting from a preparative group meeting in the college planetarium, moving to various classrooms, and finally to Glatfelter Lodge where the wise owls in the stained glass windows oversee the shared silence and expectant revelations. This is a welcoming group of Friends/friends who share life events. This year we welcomed a new student Friend as a member and we rejoice in the work of our involvement with the Refugee Resettlement Partnership of Gettysburg, through a leadership role, being a "big brother," and monetary support.

Our space includes a kitchen for pot lucks, which helps our spirit of community. I am thankful for the generosity of Gettysburg College which allows us to use this space and for the excellent leadership of the Meeting.

We Gettysburg Friends are freed from all the mundane chores and responsibilities of maintaining a Meeting house, and therefore we are always fully available to share our faith in collective worship with a diversity of spirit mingling our loving and loveable life force. With this presence we are always renewing our testimonies as a committee of the whole.

The poster "Quakers and Peace" sits on the fireplace mantle and is always there as witness to our shared peaceable inner lights. Its first sentence affirms in its simplicity why I have found my spiritual home in the Religious Society of Friends: "We actively oppose all that leads to violence among people and nations, and violence to other species and to our planet."

Goose Creek Meeting Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2023

During the past year, as violent conflict around the world has increased and the divisiveness and violence within our own country have not abated, Goose Creek Friends have found our meeting to be both a refuge and an inspiration. We are a community of peace – a community where we help one another work towards inward peace, peace among ourselves, and peace in the wider world.

We are not perfect. As individuals, we struggle with our own inner judgmentalism and also with being direct in our interactions with each other. We experience Goose Creek as a place of kindness and acceptance, while at the same time realizing that sometimes disagreements between Friends are buried beneath the surface. We seek to combine lovingkindness with honesty.

We have been pleased beyond measure to welcome new Friends into our meeting, including families with young children. We have heard that our peacefulness and simplicity have drawn them to us. They have felt accepted. Yet we regret that we have not done enough to help newcomers know us well, individually and as a meeting. The same is true for our children and teenagers. We need to find ways to help Friends new and old prepare for Meeting for Worship. We aspire to do better, to feel that we are truly one body.

We do feel that Meeting has been a space to sit in harmony with others and with the Divine. It provides us with spiritual renewal and with spiritual grounding for right action when we leave the Meeting House. Goose Creek Friends have found different ways to carry the faith and the peace among us into the world, though we are not content, knowing that what little we can do is not enough. Yet a Friend who returned to faithful attendance at Meeting after a period of time away observed that we are carrying our testimony of peace into the world with great power – that we don't see it, but others do. We hope that this is true!

When we gathered in the Meeting House to talk about the spiritual state of our meeting during the past year, one Friend said it all in a few words, “The love we have for each other is our foundation.” May we move forward in that love, guided by the Inward Light.

Herndon Friends met for worship sharing on March 10th, 2024, to focus on the spiritual state of our meeting. As the Ministry and Pastoral Care committee counsels us, “our goal is to discern where we have been during the past year as a community and as individuals in our attentiveness to the Light within. We are searching not just for a list of our activities but for inner transformations we have experienced.” Friends also had an opportunity to send responses for inclusion in this report. Baltimore Yearly Meeting suggests queries to guide us in our reflection, which are often further threshed by the Ministry and Pastoral Care committee. This year’s queries are:

How does the Friends Peace Testimony live in the communal life of our Meeting?

How do you express the Peace Testimony in your personal life?

How does our Commitment to Anti-Racism, Equality and Justice live in the communal life of our Meeting?

How do you express a Commitment to Anti-Racism, Equality and Justice in your personal life?

We were reminded of the Peace Testimony in the Baltimore Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, which quotes the declaration made to Charles II by George Fox and other Friends on November 21, 1660:

...we...utterly deny...all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world...That the spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.

Friends spoke of their conviction that peace must begin in the self and in the home, and spread outwardly to our neighbors, and then reflect into the larger world. One friend urged honesty in approaching these queries; to not bias towards how we wish to be, but rather to see what is actually true.

Internally:

One friend spoke of the necessity of being at peace in one’s self: to be in spiritual, emotional, and physical balance; saying, “We must not do violence to the spirit within.” This might come in any manner of excesses or abuses which Quakers have historically spoken against. She recalled guiding her children by saying ‘we’re not doing (x) because it is soul-crushing’. Another friend spoke of witnessing a Christian leader publicly endorsing violence against a minority religious

group; this friend spoke of being shaken into deep revelation that the spirit of Christ would never move us to take up arms against another person.

This personal experience of being shaken into a deeper witness was reflected by a friend who used to feel that he didn't have anything to do with racism because his ancestors arrived in this country after the Civil War. Upon deeper intentional study, he sees that "everything [he] is" has come to him because of his familial privilege: in housing, in finances, in educational opportunities. The realization that his "whole life is complicit with racism" grieves him and motivates him to look more deeply.

Our individual efforts:

Another friend spoke of joining our meeting community and finding it to be so different from any prior experience. She feels that friends here have an inner calm and kindness, and now notices a new capacity to touch an inner place of peace before she reacts. One friend noted that many, even among us, come from families where there was no peace.

Peacemaking at home can sometimes be more challenging than peace within our community. One friend shared about some episodes of lying within their home, and resulting tension within the family, saying, "It is hard to feel loving towards someone who I feel has wronged me." Only when both parties could individually find the bravery and vulnerability to admit their *own* trespasses, and approach the incidents with honesty, curiosity, and love, could peace be achieved. As another member's mother often said, "Love is the answer, no matter the question."

Another friend spoke of her ministry to smile at toddlers and their parents; to intentionally make friendly contact with everyone she encounters. She has grown comfortable sharing about Quakerism, and letting people know of Herndon Friends. A friend spoke of her efforts to update curricula for her public school students, by choosing books showing diverse characters. She notes that those books and curricula are spreading county-wide, and credited articles and book reviews in the Friends Journal magazine with giving her inspiration for book choices.

Within the community:

One friend noted that our communal response to the peace testimony starts at the individual level. Indeed, it *requires* our orientation to peace at the individual level.

In our anti-racism and equity efforts, our actions impact a very diverse community. About half of our budget is donations; these support local marginalized groups as well as broader Quaker organizations that are themselves working for peace and justice. In our bi-annual re-allocation of dividends, which began three years ago, we have also distributed around \$30,000 (to date) including to local organizations that aid marginalized groups like the poor, the incarcerated, the unhoused, as well as to those promoting climate solutions or an end to gun violence. We

provide some basic comforts to a local tent community, and make sandwiches monthly for the local shelter. These movements toward justice and equity grow out of the peace testimony. Decades ago, one member's Jewish father experienced discrimination when he was refused a meal in a restaurant; this friend cannot comprehend the capacity to not feed someone because they are different. Where is the love? Even if we don't see the recipients of our donations, and their diversity, our donations show we care about them and are aware of them.

The annual Peace Awards of Fairfax County, which was started 18 years ago by two of our members, has grown to include numerous organizations throughout northern Virginia, and recognizes students from almost 30 local high schools. Our meeting continues to be the driving force behind the project.

Another friend noted that 'anti-racism' and 'equity' appear twice in the queries, and that perhaps the Quaker testimonies encompassed by the acronym SPICES are limiting. What if the E stood for equity instead of equality? He expressed gratitude for two of our members in their ongoing leadership of our Anti-Racism Working Group. The ARWG has been working with the town of Herndon for many years to change the wording on the historical marker on our property, to accurately reflect our building's history as a segregated library. We can't *right* that history, but what *can* be made of that? We are called to be present to what is happening around us in a way that has integrity for us, for example, our monthly sidewalk vigil witnessing to peace and justice.

In the wider world:

One friend feels we could do better to be an anti-racist faith community, saying, "Do we wish to accept and welcome other cultures in our meeting? Do we wish to make people from other regions of the world comfortable in our meeting, and show respect, tolerance, and reverence to their experience, hardships, and beliefs?" He suggests we could increase our explicit welcome by including the ringing of a singing bowl at the start of meeting, which is a sound that is particularly associated with East-Asian cultures.

Another friend noted that Jews were persecuted all over Europe, not just in Germany. He caused us to consider if *not* perpetuating violence, *not* spreading hatred and vitriol, is itself an anti-racist act. Another member recognized that although we speak to the outside world through affiliation with Baltimore Yearly Meeting, and active participation with organizations such as Friends Committee on National Legislation, or the American Friends Service Committee, "we can't change the fact that wars do and are and will happen." And yet, we still are called to treat people with love and respect no matter who they are. For her, living the peace testimony in our own lives remains the place we can have the greatest impact.

Whether it is spiritual nurture of our own inner peace, the welcome and respect we extend to friends and strangers, sidewalk vigils for peace and justice, our impact within our community, or

messages out into the broad world via national Quaker organizations—the plaque outside our meeting room shows us the way. It reads, “Let your life speak.”

Homewood Friends Meeting
Spiritual State of the Meeting Report
2023

Creating the Report

Every year, Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) asks all monthly meetings to submit a report on the meeting's spiritual state. These reports are later shared in BYM committee meetings and publications. To guide the annual process, the BYM Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee constructs queries in addition to encouraging meetings to develop their own. This year, the Homewood Friends Ministry and Counsel Committee (M&C) initially sent out to the Meeting the BYM queries with few changes, but upon some dissatisfaction from Friends, revised them to create a more spiritually based and resonant set of queries. As in many years, we had a specially called meeting that uses worship-sharing to give our community a voice. On March 10, 2024, as a part of Sunday Meeting for Worship, we held a group worship sharing that considered four queries. (Due to time constraints, Query 5 was not considered.) Love and appreciation enveloped the room as members and attenders addressed the queries, and their responses were recorded by one M&C member and two other seasoned Friends. The voices in this report are the words of those who spoke.

- 1. How do Meeting for Worship and Meeting for Business help you and Homewood Meeting stay faithful to the Light? In addition to Meeting for Worship, are there other ways that Homewood has helped you progress on your spiritual journey this year? What else would you like to see?***

Homewood Meeting provides both comfort and challenge. Meeting is a balm. We care for each other in the face of illness and death. We quickly go deep in our worship. Our connections with other Friends and our committee work are conducted with great spirit and caring for each other. Yet we are strong enough as a community to also experience contentious meetings for business, recognizing that faithfulness to the Light is a

challenge. Through disunity, the truth and the Light can reveal themselves. Worship is a safe place for the Light to instruct. It is not always a warm Light. Sometimes the Light is terribly harsh and helps us look at difficult things.

Specific appreciation was expressed for Spiritual Formation, the delicious simple lunches, the fellowship and caring embedded in committee work, and Thursday evenings' Experiment with Light. The regular structure of First Day worship guides our weeks.

At least two Friends expressed desire for occasions of prolonged silence, maybe a spiritual retreat.

2. The whole world seems at war now. How do we individually and as a meeting practice the Quaker peace testimony?

Friends identified some individual and collective efforts to live the Quaker peace testimony. Individual efforts included handing out fliers to and speaking with people about the Ukraine war and supporting the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Some Friends participated in the recent Peace Pilgrimage in support of a ceasefire in Palestine. This experience led one speaker to share that she had some of the deepest conversations in years.

Our Peace Committee had set up a meeting about U.S. policy in Israel and Palestine with Sen. Van Hollen for the upcoming week. One Friend noted that she was deeply moved by the work of the Holding in the Light group naming the persons who have died each week by homicide in Baltimore City. Remembering and focusing on the value of every person's life is important to her.

But in the acknowledgement that we don't do enough, there is a longing to do more. Friends can consider joining our Peace and Social Justice Committee, and we can re-acquaint ourselves with the Peace Testimony as we try to address wars, violence, famine, and poisonous political discourse. One Friend noted that the Peace Testimony is a big ask and violent oppression has many forms. We have begun the conversation

about what organizations we support financially. Our support of US arms sales is a blind spot in American culture. She offered these questions: How do we support people in Baltimore who are suffering from violence? How do we change the culture of guns in our city? How do we move from protest to delivering aid to changing state policy? How do we make manufacturers accountable? These are the assignments. Love is not the answer, love is the assignment.*

*Attribution unknown

3. Does Homewood feel welcoming to you? What specifically makes you feel welcome? Are there things that you feel would make Homewood more welcoming? How does Homewood embrace differences in race, age, gender affiliation, and other characteristics?

For every person who walks through the doors of Homewood Friends Meeting for the first time, there is risk. Acknowledging and receiving the vulnerability of newcomers is critical to our community, particularly when the newcomers feel marginalized or vilified by the outside world. Speakers were grateful to Homewood for providing a safe and accepting space. Intentional efforts by Young Adult Friends, Ministry and Counsel, and the Outreach Team to welcome newcomers has made attenders feel welcomed and part of an intergenerational community without feeling proselytized. One attender noted that, as she moves through life as a trans woman, there are those who look at her with scorn and disgust. And then she came here and people looked to her not just as human...but they saw the Light of God in her. It galvanizes her to walk through her life in the same way. Like many other churches, Homewood is wrestling with being welcoming. Homewood proves that there are things we can do, but it is imperative to look to the future and consider trying new approaches, a “recalibration” of outreach. We can’t do that unless we wrap our arms around each other.

4. How is Homewood working to be an anti-racist and justice-seeking community? What more could we be doing?

Despite outreach efforts in the past several years, Homewood Friends Meeting is still predominantly white. The topic of racism remains problematic at Homewood. Some people may be unaware of the halting steps we have taken to address white supremacy in our Meeting and in our community. Our Meeting's new Dismantling Racism Working Group has many young, energetic, and thoughtful people. The work is approached with many questions: How do we honor the past when we acknowledge that Quakerism in the United States is historically white and has frequently failed to recognize and combat its own and the larger society's racism? What is the genuine and honest honoring of the past so that we can move forward? It was suggested that we work on how to talk to people who have very different points of view about racism. We acknowledge the "white" traditions that Friends in the United States inherited from 17th century Britain. Being aware of those traditions and their roots can help us work more intentionally to incorporate the perspectives of people of color into our interracial community building.

One of the considerations is to create a list of activities that people might choose to do in 2024. That way there is a lot of flexibility for people to organize themselves. Things are moving even if not quickly enough. Ultimately, having more people of color in Quaker spaces will make these spaces safer.

5. If you have attended Meeting for Business, how has that experience been? In what way do you think our Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business could improve?

Not discussed due to lack of time.

Looking Back and Forward

At the beginning of 2023 as Ministry and Counsel looked ahead, a focal point was on encouraging growth in attendance within our Meeting. The Ministry and Counsel Committee envisioned an arc of Adult Religious Education classes, which would provide opportunities to nurture spiritual growth, to encourage the exchange of different perspectives, and to seek ways to actively promote anti-racism in a city with a diverse population.

Homewood has begun to fulfill some of these visions. The arc of Adult Religious Education classes is still a work in progress, but a monthly Bible Study group is enthusiastically attended by many Young Adult Friends as well as older Friends. We have provided a Spiritual Formation Program, in which many Friends are joyfully participating. A significant milestone was our integration of a new sound system, which transformed our meetings for worship: We could hear each other's messages! As we hear more voices, it seems that more people are led to speak. Our newly configured Dismantling Racism Change Group has begun to offer activities that ignite reflection and discussion. Along with Stony Run Meeting and the Lillie Carroll Jackson Museum, in May Homewood sponsored an event in which Charles L. Chavis, Jr., PhD, Director of African and African American Studies at George Mason University, discussed his book *The Silent Shore*, which examined racial violence on the Eastern Shore.

These activities provide a good foundation for 2024. We hope that our growing membership will fuel more spiritual energy within our community to nurture ourselves, our city, and our dear earth. The outer world knocks at the door of our collective Spirit. We seek a clear compass to address social justice and peace issues. We still yearn for a meaningful intersection with our struggling and complex city and seek ways forward. Announcing names of Baltimore homicide victims each week reminds us of lives lost. All this, but at the same time we must continue to nurture our love and care for each other, which is - as voices in our report express - the seed of all other things.

Hopewell Centre's Spiritual State of the Meeting – 2023
(sent March 13, 2024)

What practices of your meeting are successful, and how could you do better? Consider Meeting for Worship for Business, committee work, outreach, and mutual support.

The comments started with one of the basics: eating. We at Hopewell Centre like to eat: potluck, dinners at Friends' houses, our men's committee called OATS (Open And Truthful Sharing), and even our snack times elicit strong conversation and community building.

Another successful trait of our community mentioned was our strong committees: Ministry and Counsel, Social Concerns and Outreach, Pastoral Care, Buildings and Grounds, Finance, and Hospitality. These behind-the-scenes entities meet and address the business and needs of the meeting – many individuals also take on tasks which suit their skills and which actively support the meeting. Together these committees and our membership evince a flexibility that allows responsiveness to reaching our potential as a meeting and promoting new ways as we grow.

Our wide committees with their inclusive and ever-changing membership spread leadership around, making a platform constantly inviting people to participate and express their views.

Several areas we could improve include: a formal review and approval of minutes, ensure better hearing of Zoom participants, and making sure our welcoming materials are up to date. We also believe we could do a better job of communicating Quaker process and history to newcomers.

We are a welcoming community which embraces nearly everyone who walks through the door. It is the same joy we show in mutually supporting each other in community and in our lives.

That joy empowers how we write our newsletter, how we interact with others of different faith communities such as Saint Paul's AME, the Bahai's, and the Metropolitan Community Church, and how we offer ourselves to our outer community and to the world.

The whole world seems at war now. How does the Quaker peace testimony live in your meeting? How do your members practice the peace testimony?

We are an active peace community, known for participating in local and regional events. We are well represented at local prayer vigils for peace, and we make sure that current conflicts are part of our everyday conversations. Our monthly Community Prayer Group often addresses concerns for peace. We rely on our Peace testimony to inform our actions and our words.

Our prayers and compassion go to all those who suffer under the ravages of war.

We listen for the hope of peace. We pray not only for the innocent but also for the dictators and terrorists of the world. We also pray for the resolution of complicated political issues and for democracy over dictatorship.

We support through donation and prayer the work of FCNL, AFSC, VICPP, and Valley Interfaith Council. Some of our attenders actively lobby their congressional representatives in West Virginia. They advocate for national programs that ensure peace and raise up the disadvantaged.

We embrace Quaker history and its tradition of education and revelation. Together with Church World Services we remember through our deeds refugees in our own community, supplying backpacks full of school supplies for children and kits of work supplies for adults. We sponsor children who are not able to afford Quaker camps. We work in programs that feed the homeless.

Internally, we address misunderstandings and don't let things slide and fester. We follow Thich Nhat Hanh in seeking "Peace in every step."

Are we doing enough? Probably not. But we are constantly challenging ourselves to do more. Small drops eventually fill a bucket.

Has your meeting opened itself to a wider range of attenders? How? Is anything in the way? Are there baked-in subtle prejudices we should address?

The number of attenders and visitors to Hopewell Centre is growing, and the age range is broadening. We welcome visitors through our website, improved signage at our Meeting Houses, and personal greetings on First Day. We keep them connected through weekly emails and monthly newsletters. Visitors say that they sense a warm, open community.

We are ready to take a closer look at developing the skills of a "greeter." We want to respond to each individual's interests, to be friendly and inclusive without overwhelming. We want to avoid getting caught up in conversations during fellowship time, overlooking a newcomer.

We keep checking for subtle prejudices of which we have been unaware, which we want to correct. One is that our restroom signs signal a distinction between women and men. Another is that our entrances and bathrooms are designed for the able-bodied. A third is that Hopewell is in a rural area, requiring a car. Perhaps we could provide transportation for people who are unable to get there. Perhaps we could hold satellite workshops or worship gatherings at local lifecare centers and nursing homes.

Hybrid meetings have widened our attendance. We are still adapting to this medium, working on improving sound and including those on Zoom during fellowship breaks.

We become visible to potential attenders through outreach. For instance, we are active participants in local interfaith activities and we serve meals for the homeless. However, at these times we might not be recognized as Quakers. Some simple way to identify our meeting, such as wearing Hopewell Centre t-shirts, might help.

Another way we open to wider attendance is by sharing space. We intend to increase community use of our beautiful pavilion at Hopewell. Several community groups depend on meeting at Centre, and we could find still more ways to use Centre for outreach.

How does your meeting's walk with Spirit inform your understanding of right living? How is your meeting working to become an anti-racist and justice-seeking community?

As we walk together in the Spirit, we feel a sense of infinite fellowship. This enables us to understand right living: we perceive that of God in all, so each of us ministers to all. Sharing our values openly, we seek equality, sustainable living, and harmony with Quaker testimonies.

We are working to become an anti-racist and justice-seeking community. We have hosted an interfaith unity picnic and attended activities of the local AME Church. We encourage community use of Centre Meetinghouse; several Alcoholics Anonymous groups meet there as well as a small nondenominational church. Our religious education programs have emphasized Quaker values and testimonies. Our door is wide open, welcoming all regardless of ethnicity, skin color, or sexual orientation.

But we confess that we can always do more, taking "Faith and Practice" as our guide. We continue to seek to raise "good trouble." And we treat people with love not because of who they are, but because of who we are.

Respectfully submitted,

Hopewell Centre Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

March 13, 2024

Langley Hill Friends Meeting 2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

Summary Statement

Over the past year, Langley Hill Friends Meeting has worked together – in a spirit of love, patience, and kindness – to discern our path forward on important questions, including the difficult question of whether and how we would continue to deploy video conferencing during meetings for worship. These efforts have borne fruit. We still have more work to do. For example, we must become more consistent in our efforts to listen to one another, without judgment, and in recognition that there is that of God in every person. With that said, we believe that the Meeting's spiritual state is strong and growing stronger.

We believe also that this strengthened spirit will allow us to shine a Quakerly Light to address the many challenges we see in the world: international conflicts and concerns about the state of our democracy, the environment, and the persistence of racism and prejudice. As we shine this Light beyond the Langley Hill Friends Meetinghouse, we are committed to listening to and caring for one another in a spirit of human patience and Divine love.

Background

Last year's report described the spiritual state of Langley Hill Friends Meeting as strong, even though we were not yet unified on important questions pertaining to our worship practice. We reported that the Meeting was "unified in our commitment to hold one another, and the Meeting as a whole, in the Light, in a spirit of love, patience, and joy [and that we were] unified in our commitment to listen carefully to what the Spirit would have us do."

Worship sharing sessions on this and other important matters, a discernment session dedicated to the spiritual state of the meeting, and written communications to the Ministry & Worship Committee informed the drafting of this report.

The Meeting's Spiritual State: Where we are strong.

The qualities of inclusion, patience, respect, listening and sharing in the Spirit, and trust play a particularly important role in shaping spirit-led worship at Langley Hill. These qualities are rooted in our Quaker values of community and equality, which are based in love. And these values have guided us as a community over the past year.

These values shine through in our commitment and care for one another. Through new guidelines developed by Care & Clearness, the Meeting community has made a special effort to treat everyone who steps foot into our meetinghouse with respect and care.

These values were also present during our corporate discernment on meeting for worship formats even while the process was sometimes challenging, leading to some individuals feeling hurt, excluded, and misunderstood. And because these deliberations were ongoing throughout and in the years since the height of the pandemic, many Friends have been worn down by the process.

Loving efforts were made to listen, understand and include all of us. Though we were not unified in our preferences and beliefs about worship format, we sensed that the Spirit had led us to clarity about moving forward.

In sensing this leading, the Meeting approved the following minute at its April Meeting for Business.

With respect to Meeting for Worship format, Langley Hill Friends are not unified in our personal preferences, and in some cases, our deeply held beliefs. At the same time, we sense that the Spirit has led us to a clear recognition that providing video conferencing during Meeting for Worship has become an essential tool for living out our Meeting's values of community and equality.

Based on these values, Langley Hill adopts a regular practice of hybrid meetings for worship every second and fourth Sundays of the month. On first, third, and fifth Sundays, Langley Hill will hold parallel meetings for worship – one (non-hybrid) in-person meeting at the Meeting House, the other via video conferencing – as our regular practice.

The community is growing and changing and so we will revisit this minute as led by the Spirit.

We believe that through this difficult journey, the Langley Hill community has emerged stronger in its commitment to listen deeply to one another and to the Spirit.

Since it has been safer to gather in person again, we've experienced a special focus on community this past year. For example, resuming monthly potlucks, instituting new "Friendly 8's" gatherings, reestablishing a schedule for Junior Monthly Meeting, a Guided Quaker Conversation series, and community meals in support of the Mary Jane Simpson Fund and Quaker camp scholarships have helped strengthen our sense of belonging to one another. Our midweek meeting for worship is another important way for Friends who especially value the in-person worship experience to connect with each other and with the Spirit.

Friends report that they have grown spiritually through their work on committees, in their service to the community, and through regular worship group gatherings with Friends too ill to attend meeting in-person. Our committees, including Peace and International Outreach, Fellowship, Social Concerns, Religious Education, and the Anti-racism Working Group have

played an especially important role in helping Langley Hill live out our Quaker values.¹ The Care and Clearness Committee has played an especially important role in tending to individuals in need of support within our community. As one Friend noted,

"I've experienced spiritual growth partly through the experience of being cared for by the community as I've undergone some big life transitions. [...] It's not always easy to ask for help, and doing so in the context of Langley Hill has deepened my sense of God's presence."

Finally, meetings for worship at Langley Hill continue to be an essential source of spiritual vitality. As one Friend observed,

"For me, the Meeting is very much the biggest part of my spiritual life. The Meeting for Worship is key." In these tumultuous times, this Friend noted, meeting for worship is the time "when I can center and almost have a conversation with God."

Where we can do better.

Though we have worked hard to address our differences with a loving spirit, we still have work to do in mindfully following and ensuring Quaker practice in our worship, worship sharing, and meetings for worship with a concern for business. For some, we too frequently respond to one another directly, as if in a discussion, rather than maintaining worshipful practice.

We also have work to do in learning how to listen deeply to one another when we disagree. We could do a better job, for example, in treating one another with tenderness, especially when members of the community have difficulty expressing themselves in a way that makes them easy to listen to and understand. As Quakers, we have to remind ourselves that God's Light resides in all people and God's message can come from anywhere. In this regard, sometimes the Spirit may be speaking to us through someone with whom we find it hard to connect.

Not surprisingly, Langley Hill Friends often hold deeply-held views that stem from Quaker testimonies. Such convictions represent an important strength in our Meeting. At the same time, when we express such views, we sometimes fail to exercise humility. We can be too quick to assume that because we share Quaker values, all Friends will agree with our perspective on complex issues. When we engage those with whom we disagree – whether they are within or beyond the Meeting – we must remind ourselves to do so in a manner that

¹ We note that the Climate Working Group paused its work this year, in part because the work is being done in other committees, but also due to declining engagement by the community, even though the climate concerns remain. The group continues its presence as an informal study group, meeting occasionally as the need arises. For more detail, see the working group's report presented, to Meeting for Business in October 2023.

honors that of God in everyone. Relatedly, we could be gentler in our expectations of one another, seeking progress, not perfection. For example, when we think a committee's work could be done differently or better, our first impulse should be to offer our help.

Our spirit has been strengthened through the regular attendance of new young families and some occasional visitors who appreciate Quaker worship and community. Though we intend to reach out and connect to newcomers with warmth and a welcoming spirit, we could do better here as well. At rise of meeting, we often turn to those with whom we are already close. This is understandable. We want to check in with Friends we know are going through challenging times or whom we haven't seen in a while. We must also recognize that newcomers need this loving outreach and connection too, even if we do not know the details of their lives. We need to do more to engage them, perhaps by talking about the ways we experience the Spirit in worship, through our work on committees, and through Quaker witness in the world.

Finally, though we are proud of the work we've done together to discern a path forward on our meeting for worship format, we know that many Friends feel a sense of regret and even sadness that we are not worshiping, "all together, all the time." As the text of the approved minute suggests, we continue to remain open to the possibility that our worship practice may continue to change.

As a spiritual community, where should our focus be going forward?

Given the challenges we are facing in the world, and given the spiritual growth we've experienced as a community over the past year, many Friends see this moment as one in which Langley Hill Friends Meeting should be turning its focus more outwardly. In seeing that of God in every person, Quakers have a particularly important role to play in this moment of human history. As one Friend noted, "We need to be a Light in the world."

Other Friends note that Quaker ministry in the world does not diminish the need to care for and attend to one another. As one Friend observed, peacemaking begins in our own heart. It then extends to our family, our local communities, and the national community. Being effective peacemakers in the world requires that we live our Quaker values with the people who are closest to home. We need to love, cherish, listen to, nurture, and care for one another.

We seem to be moving toward a shared perspective that the Meeting does indeed have a special role to play in the world. The world needs Quaker witness now more than ever. In turning our gaze outward, however, we must also attend to the health of the Meeting community itself. To be effective in the world, we must be grounded in the practice of Quaker values within our meeting. In recognizing that of God in one another, we are better able to bring that Light out into the world.

LITTLE BRITAIN MONTHLY MEETING

SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE MEETING

For the year of 2023-24

Friends at Little Britain Monthly Meeting met during Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business, followed by a potluck meal to consider the Queries for our Spiritual State of the Meeting Report. The Queries led to lively discussion among our members.

Our Ministry and Pastoral Care representative usually calls us from contemplative worship with a traditional greeting, learned from past BYM clerk, Miriam Green, "Let us continue in the Spirit of Worship as we take up the business of the Meeting". Friends find that this helps them stay centered as we transition to the business portion of our meeting. We find that because we are a small meeting, we have the gift to be able to encourage all to participate in discussions and don't find ourselves constrained by time limits. Unfortunately, because there are few members, it can be difficult to find Truth when there are strong feelings around an issue and we often find ourselves asking for additional input from Friends outside our direct Meeting members. This allows us to maintain close ties within our Quarterly Meeting

Penn Hill Meetinghouse is along a major road and has an outside sign, "There is no Way to Peace, Peace is the Way." Members feel that Peace is a main focus of our members. We value promoting Peace, encouraging and respecting communication among members and welcoming expressions of understanding. As a small meeting we value input and try to make room to meet people where they are, to listen, explain and redirect if there is misunderstanding. We strive to avoid "correcting" or "othering". We try to avoid putting people into boxes, recognizing the value of individuals with unique backgrounds and experiences. George Fox spoke of Walking Cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in all people, and Jesus met with marginalized and dispossessed persons. Spirit leads us to Love others despite differences.

Our meetings are in a Rural area. Friends feel that this gives us a grounding in humility, knowing that we are not the ones in charge. We also find this leaves us struggling with discussions on racism and we do not find the issues to be as obvious since there is little diversity in our immediate community. The discussions and information from BYM have been helpful in seeding discussions among our meetings and during Business sessions to improve awareness and sensitivity.

One Friend shared that she was involved in Civil Rights issues in the 60's and 70's and thought that the work was done. But now is aware that we are still fighting the same issue and is more aware of the unspoken racist ideas that arise between generations.

Our Members are encouraged to continue outreach among our neighbors and co-workers with purposeful acts of Kindness.

Little Falls Friends Meeting

Spiritual State of the Meeting – 2023

We met together after Meeting for Worship to discuss five question areas to help us discern the spiritual state of the meeting.

1) How does Meeting for Worship help you and Little Falls Meeting stay faithful to the Light? Are there other ways that Little Falls has helped you to progress on your spiritual journey this year? What else would you like to see?

Our underlying sense of trust makes sharing our spiritual insights possible. We all appreciate the quiet and still worship as a respite from our busy lives and an opportunity for focusing on our relationship with the Spirit. We enjoy the reflection that comes from listening intently to the messages of others. One member recalled that we held a special meeting for healing for a member who was hospitalized and very sick and how powerful and meaningful it had been.

The additional opportunities provided by our monthly discussions and put-luck lunches help us to get a better understanding of each other and help greatly in building our sense of community. In the past we have focused on writings by Thich Nhat Hanh, Rufus Jones, Marcell Martin, Barry Morley, Marianne Robinson and on various articles including many from *Friends Journal*. We discussed topics such as consensus vs sense of the meeting, the peace testimony in the time of war, quaker testimonies and the issue of abortion. We also discussed our experience after we walked a local labyrinth together.

All look forward to continuing these monthly discussions and activities.

Some members expressed a desire to follow up the discussions through informal communications throughout the week, for example through email or text. But attempts to do so have not been reciprocated. We should plan to an effort to encourage and improve on this.

2) The whole world seems at war now. How do we individually and as a meeting practice the Quaker peace testimony?

We held a discussion on the peace testimony in the time of war as we looked specifically at the Israel-Hamas conflict through the lens of articles from *Friends Journal* and *The Guardian* and an interview with Sa'ed Atshan, a professor of peace and conflict studies at Swarthmore College, who is a Quaker and a former student at the Ramallah Friends School in the West Bank. The meeting also supports the Ramallah Friends School with annual donations.

We recognize that we could and should be doing more, both as a meeting and as individuals. A few members mentioned that they felt that watching TV news had become very discouraging and something of a mental health hazard. There was a suggestion that we should be regularly holding in the Light the Palestinian people and that “we cannot bury our heads in the sand.”

3) Does Little Falls feel welcoming to you? What specifically makes you feel welcome? Are there things that you feel would make Little Falls more welcoming? How does Little Falls embrace differences in race, age, gender affiliation, and other characteristics?

A new attender expressed that she felt very welcomed and that having done some preparation in learning about Quakerism beforehand had helped too. Our new web site provides access to lots of information which helps a great deal. Another new attender expressed that she not only felt welcomed, but that she felt she truly belonged here from the first moment she arrived. Receiving a hand-written card from a member was very unexpected and extremely welcoming.

We always invite guests to introduce themselves after Meeting for Worship and make an effort to reach out to them afterwards to invite them to return. Frequently we send information about Quaker worship and other practices to those who continue to worship with us.

We recognize that we are not very welcoming to families with children because we have no children who regularly attend meeting. On those few occasions when we do have children attend, we always have one of our members convene with the children in our schoolhouse after about 15 minutes of worshipping with the adult group. We used to have children who attended regularly. In the past we have had a summer learning program and a vacation bible school. Because we have a general understanding that parents want their children to have a religious education and that fact is a motivation for parents to attend religious services, we are trying to develop an approach to parents and young people on our web site.

4) How is Little Falls working to be an anti-racist and justice-seeking community? What more could we be doing?

Recognizing that we are all at different points on the journey to understanding our responsibilities in working toward racial justice, we seek our individual ways toward anti-racist and justice-seeking endeavors. We have members who actively participate in organizations such as:

Coming to the Table - the local affiliate of a national organization with affiliates in sixteen states where participants meet regularly for truth-telling, building relationships, healing, and taking action to dismantle inequitable systems and structures based on race.

Quaker Voice of Maryland - an all-volunteer group of Friends who seek to advocate for state legislative action focusing on the areas of criminal justice reform, housing equity, and climate justice.

Racial Justice Alliance of Maryland - a group of volunteers from five Harford County religious communities who work toward racial justice by supporting local efforts to combat inequities in education, the criminal justice system, and government policies.

As a group, we are aware of the racial disparities and inequities in our surrounding county. In our Peace and Social Concerns work, we were able to donate to several organizations that work to combat racism, promote inclusivity, and combat those disparities.

We also know that as a meeting we could be doing more to facilitate learning about and recognizing our individual implicit biases and the ways in which we could counter their effects in our daily interactions.

5) If you have attended Meeting for Business, how has that experience been? In what way do you think our Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business could improve? In what ways does it fall short?

Our meetings for business are generally very positive experiences. We always begin and end with a period of silence. As a community we are very adaptable and have a good practice of hearing everyone's opinions before reaching a decision. As a small community, our meetings are frequently quite short and that fact is appreciated by all who attend. One person expressed that the honesty and trust expressed in Meeting for Business was good for new-comers to experience as an introduction to the Meeting community. One new-comer felt welcomed to attend but felt that more decisions could have been made.

One member wished that more people would attend because it is an expression of the health of the Meeting.

Mattaponi Friends Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2023

April 2, 2024

1. What are best practices of your meeting's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business (MfWCB) that you could share with other meetings? In what way do you think your MfWCB falls short?

- We conduct the meeting in a spirit of worship yet maintain a casual quality to the meeting.
- A potluck lunch is held following the MfWCB, which encourages participation.
- Sometimes the MfWCB goes over time. This raises the question as to whether we need to appoint committees. However, our meeting is small and spread out across four counties and two countries. Committee work would be challenging.

2. The whole world seems at war now. How does the Quaker peace testimony live in your meeting? How do your members practice the peace testimony?

"We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever; and this is our testimony to the whole world. The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world."

—Declaration of Friends to Charles II, 1660

- Members practice the peace testimony by:
- regular group sharing in deep stillness and meditation on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza so as to engender a spiritual activism that serves to counter a sense of helplessness and despair.
- nurturing practices that help prepare the spiritual "soil" for each individual to be able to respond when an opportunity for action arises whether in protest or by planting flowers of yellow and blue in solidarity with the Ukrainian people.
- being examples of peacemakers as a group or as individuals in both our communities and our personal relationships. For example, we have a large banner with "Love Thy Neighbor (No Exceptions)" hanging on our meetinghouse. We also are members of a local interfaith group of community churches with the common purpose of improving the lives of local citizens.
- pondering the question "What would bridge the divide between the Old Testament 'an eye for an eye' with the New Testament 'love one another'?" as we seek and pray for an end to fighting in Gaza.

3. Does your meeting suffer the arrogance of certainty? For example, does your meeting have subtle prejudices for those unlike them?

- Members defined "arrogance of certainty" as a kind of blindness created by our "shoulds" and "oughts" about the way we believe life operates. This can come off as superior and arrogant. The alternative is humility in our certainty, strident in our desire to take right action with a humble heart.
- As individuals we are diverse in background, age, and life experience, yet we respect one another and work at staying away from arrogance of certainty. We are of common mind on most issues within our meeting.

- Cultivating a humble heart strident in a desire to take right action is the work of a lifetime. This work prepares the ground for peace activism and nonviolent resistance, such as encounters with a neighbor invested in the value system of white supremacy. It is comparable to the work of regenerative agriculture, which focuses on soil health and soil life. Vitality of the soil yields healthy plants that nurture us. In the same way, carefully tended hearts and spirit, even when much of the work is underground and inside, yields strong healthy love action.

4. Tell how your meeting's walk with Spirit informs your understanding of racism and how you are meant to live?

- Our walk with Spirit leads us to believe that there is “that of God in all.” Spirit is in nature. Spirit is in every person.
- Racism is fear based—fear of the other, of harm from the other. Racism and the belief system that supports it run counter to our walk with Spirit.
- The belief that there is “that of God in all” is the remedy for healing the systemic racism in our culture. Belief in God’s goodness helps us deal with fear. We are more likely to overcome our fear and take a chance to connect with another we may disagree with when we believe they embody the light too. The natural world becomes a place of solace and healing where we can connect with Spirit to deal with our fears and find hope and courage. This belief inspires us to do our best to really listen to another, which can often create a bridge of understanding and respect.
- Coming together weekly as a meeting supports and strengthens each one of us. The depth of seeking and sharing deepens our personal practices and inspires us to witness daily to the love and light of Spirit.

Spiritual State of **Maury River** Friends Meeting in 2023

Looking back over 2023, Maury River Friends can see our little Quaker community as a thriving garden in which we have experienced a sense of growth, renewal, strengthening of community, and grounding in Spirit that has gathered momentum throughout the year.

During 2023 several things helped our Meeting to grow. A strong Outreach Committee has made us less invisible so that people could see what we have to offer. The members of our Youth Religious Education/Youth Creek Ministry worked cheerfully with whatever unpredictable combination of children arrived on any given Sunday, and celebrated each child's birthday with a song and cupcakes during Fellowship. A Quaker parenting group formed and has been meeting the third Sunday of every month during our 2nd Hour time. A newly reestablished House and Grounds Committee started making much-needed repairs to the meetinghouse. Donations went up, including those needed to put in a new, more sustainable heat-pump system.

Overall, there has been a readiness to welcome newcomers along with the diversity and gifts they have brought to us. As new individuals and families have showed up and continued attending, we have once again become a multigenerational meeting. Our committees are full and active. For some Friends it has been hard to adjust to the increased hubbub that intergenerational diversity can bring. Some have felt a diminished availability of silence in which to worship. We will need to be mindful of such concerns as we move forward together.

We are seeing the blessing in having co-clerks, not only for presiding over business but on a number of our committees as well. The co-clerks can stand in for each other, discuss agendas and possible difficulties, and provide each other support and encouragement. We also find it easier to fill clerk positions when they are shared in this way.

We persevered through some profound disagreements and challenges to our sense of ourselves as reasonable and fair-minded people. An Ad Hoc committee labored mightily to try to help us resolve the long-standing and divisive issue of whether to keep our land and Meetinghouse or prepare to sell and move to a less costly, more eco-friendly worship site. Seeing a family living in dire poverty on the land adjacent to the Meetinghouse led us to offer and provide some help. But we also explored legal solutions as the people next door continued to damage and pollute the land and creek we share, affecting the safety and integrity of the place where we worship.

We were glad for Peace and Justice members' participation in wider community groups working against racism and hate and other forms of injustice. During 2023, Peace and Justice began to look into an issue of environmental racism in our neighboring town of Glasgow. Persistent flooding there is disproportionately affecting neighborhoods that are predominantly African American. Working through Rockbridge Conservation—and local leaders in Glasgow, a knowledgeable Maury River member has been helping to write effective grants that can provide resources to remedy the flooding problem.

The Ministry and Care Committee has heard from many who are looking to strengthen their spiritual lives. Thinking of our Maury River Friends Meeting as a garden, we see connection to

Spirit as the essential lattice. It supports everything else we want to grow in our spiritual lives and in our actions in the world. Some have expressed gratitude for our form of worship at Maury River: helping to preserve the silence, opening the way for vocal ministry, guiding those who are new to Quaker practices. One member likened our worship time to an exercise class, but one based in spirit; spiritual strengthening through spiritual practice. An important element is that, even though we each have our own spiritual journey, we still practice together. M&C has added more second hours based on queries, testimonies, and worship-sharing. Additionally, M&C has guided the formation of an ongoing spiritual book group. Intentionally, our first book was *Jesus and the Disinherited* by African American theologian, pastor, and author, Howard Thurman.

Toward the end of 2023, as the war in Ukraine continued, a new and horrific war broke out between Israel and Hamas. Many of us felt weighed down by sadness and questions about why peace is so elusive and what it means to be a pacifist in a time of war. The enormity of what was happening caused some of us feel powerless. We were individually and collectively looking for ways to ground ourselves to face these horrors, along with accelerating political turmoil, the challenges of climate change, and massive migration in an unquiet world. We wondered how and where we could possibly make a difference. Several members have said their pacifism is reflected, simply and mindfully, in the way they lead their daily lives.

As we take these concerns forward into 2024, we expect to have an increased focus on our spiritual lives. We will look hard at what it means to be a peacemaker, and to lead a life of peace in ways both small and large. We will keep asking questions: What spiritual work and specific skills do we need to remain steady and be effective while working for peace and social justice in hard times? How do we care for ourselves and each other so that we can keep on going? What are the special spiritual needs of families raising children? When living a life that translates Spirit into action, how do we discern what is ours to do?

Preserving joy in difficult times can be an act of courage. At Maury River Friends Meeting, we have experienced the year just past as a time of joyful growth and energizing, sometimes challenging, change. Looking ahead, we want to be courageous about taking on hard issues. We want to add more singing and celebrations. We want to strengthen our ties with each other, and with the greater Quaker community. We want to find that of God in the people we love and enjoy, and in the people we find hard to know or understand. We want to search deep within ourselves for the Spirit that will sustain us as we lead the lives we are called upon to live. We want to make a joyful noise. We want to preserve the silence and remember to listen.

Midlothian Friends Meeting

2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

Midlothian Friends noticed that our vocal ministry was slipping into a conversational back-and-forth pattern. Frustration grew to the point that we decided to reconstitute our Spiritual Nurture Committee to evaluate the situation and suggest solutions. As a starting point, the committee sponsored a Quakerism 101 session in the fall on vocal ministry. Our hope is to foster a more spirit-led vocal ministry. We also made a more concerted effort to start meeting for worship on time and in silence.

But we have asked ourselves if dialing back this conversational approach may have affected some Friends' sense of emotional safety. For instance, one Friend confided that in order to be emotionally safe, she needs to express herself without restraint and with freedom and flexibility. She accepts messages from the Spirit and must share them without trying to edit herself.

Others feel comfortable with the new guidance. They know that we come to worship in many ways but are always in community. More silence is always helpful and allows us to be more thoughtful and spirit-led in worship. Friends also appreciate and benefit from others who may bring a different quality like humor to worship.

One Friend spoke for many when she said she feels safe to speak during worship and never feels she needs to ask permission. She appreciates others helping her to feel "part of."

A related issue is the quality of our Meetings for Discernment (*our name for Meeting for Business*). We have tried to make these meetings less businesslike and more worshipful. We have encouraged more thoughtful silence between messages and try to take all opinions into consideration before arriving at a sense of meeting. Our Clerk's quiet voice and demeanor and her thoughtful queries have been very helpful in this process. As a result of our efforts together, our Meetings for Discernment have become more spiritual and have helped Friends experience the oneness in community.

Spiritual humility is another quality that is important to Midlothian Friends Meeting. This means being open to the Spirit's continuing revelation every moment of every day. Our Racial Justice Study Group exemplifies spiritual humility in the way it has provided our meeting with new ways of looking at race relations.

Spiritual humility also includes a continuing awareness of other social justice issues such as the continuing wars in Gaza and Ukraine and struggles among indigenous peoples and those with different sexual orientations. To have spiritual humility means looking at these issues in new ways and being open to changing and growing as individuals and as a community.

William Blake wrote: *"the man who never changes his opinion is like still water, and breeds reptiles of the mind."* Friends should not become spiritually complacent. We should never think that "we got this, they don't." We all face different challenges and need to be open to other spiritual paths. Being Quakers means always working on your connections with Spirit and being open to where those connections lead. We are compelled to do our best.

Being spiritually humble is a deep concept and one that may be hard to put into practice, but one thing that stands out is being non-judgmental of self, others and as a body. Strong humility carries a sense that we are one part of a much larger existence.

The Quaker Peace Testimony has been especially meaningful to Midlothian Friends Meeting during these difficult times.

As George Fox wrote: "We...utterly...deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretense whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world. ... The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as to once command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for any kingdoms of this world."

Peace is an action verb, not just a concept. We know that we must continue to work for it. One Friend shared some of her struggles with the Peace Testimony but has come to understand that man is an imperfect being and mankind has always been at war. One thing we can do is to try to relieve suffering in whatever ways possible during and after conflicts. We must find peace in every encounter and community even when it appears to be unachievable.

Midlothian Friends and Quakers in general work for peace in many ways. The Baltimore Yearly Meeting, Friends Committee on National Legislation, the Thrifty Quaker (a thrift store that donates proceeds to 3 different charities each month), and the Richmond Peace Education Center, among others, are important partners in advocating for peace, and we appreciate their support and guidance. We are also grateful for our Peace & Social Action Committee and Racial Justice Study Group and their efforts supporting peacemaking and racial reconciliation. These groups have been critical in moving our meeting forward.

The Peace Testimony draws many Friends to our meeting. The world today includes a constant drumbeat of war, evolving issues with artificial intelligence, cyber war, political hate speech and other things that we may find abhorrent. But we take heart knowing we have Midlothian Friends Meeting as a haven in which to promote peace and love and to continually hold victims of war in the Light.

Monongalia Friends Meeting

2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

With the help of a young Friend with technical and marketing know-how, we worked hard in May and June on a brochure about our Meeting, which we plan to distribute throughout our community during 2024. We also developed a Land Acknowledgement during the summer and contributed financially to an all-day free event at WVU that invited leaders of several Native Nations with historical, ancestral, and current connections to the land now known as West Virginia. We had a table at the Morgantown Pride Festival and a table at our community's social and environmental justice fair. Finally, our Meeting celebrated World Quaker Day by inviting the community to join us for Meeting for Worship, lunch, and a second hour discussion.

Over the summer we had four to five Friends at business meetings, and we had four first-time attenders. We averaged three Friends at meeting each week. Nevertheless, with all this good news, our clerk came to the realization that she needed to step down as clerk due to burnout.

The BYM general secretary joined us over Indigenous Peoples' weekend to facilitate two visioning sessions for us. Discussions and personal reflection led us to a realization that we needed to focus on current needs regarding structure, workload, and responsibilities rather than the more distant future. Although our spirit together remains strong, our numbers are low, and, for many of us, our energy and time is limited. We found agreement in the idea of "doing less" and continuing to enjoy and find fulfillment in the time we spent together. We agreed to split up "coordinating" and clerking duties, hold Business Meeting quarterly rather than monthly, and look for other ways to reduce our "work" while still having meaningful time together in worship, business, and fellowship. We also agreed that this was not the time for a grand vision, but rather a time to "keep things simple." We spoke also about the burdens and joys of having a physical Meeting House and agreed to continue to reflect on this as we move through the next year.

Nottingham Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

We come to Meeting for peace, tranquility, and a respite from the controversies of the world. We find the divisions of the world adverse to our beliefs of equality, justice and 'that of God in each person'. Some noted they have experienced prejudice and felt prejudice in areas other than race. We are a community of seekers open to expanding our views and learning from one another. We are open to racial diversity, but it escapes us.

Our doors have been open to a non-Friend, Spanish speaking congregation for over 2 years. They use our building on Sunday afternoon and one evening during the week. Being a small group they are grateful for the use of our space to worship.

We feel encouraged to see new people joining us for Worship. We celebrate the gifts and blessings that are bestowed upon us. One Friend brings music to summer Worship at Little Elk Meeting. We enjoy fellowship during our summer and fall flea markets. Proceeds from our fall flea market were used to help families displaced by a large multi building fire. We support local food banks. Our annual Christmas Carol Sing at the Brick meeting welcomes many families with singing rising into the rafters of the eighteenth-century building.

We have cared for our meetinghouse in Oxford. A new roof on the back of the building, repaired the windows, refreshed the stone in the driveway and removed several trees. The Brick and Little Elk meetings are also cared for by Nottingham Monthly Meeting.

Our Friendly Hour (light lunch) after business meeting helps to strengthen our community. We hold a Spiritual discussion group on the third First day of the month. We are excited to see it led by new attenders and members seeking to learn more about Quaker practices and how they relate to society today.

We feel the Spirit drawing us together, encouraging us to be more open to gratitude and forgiveness, for ourselves and others. When we pull ourselves away from our daily routines, we can reflect and find peace in the quiet. We find our mental health also improves when sitting in silence, allowing the calm and peace of the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us.

Nottingham Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

PS: We chose the topic: Why do we come to Meeting for Worship

Patapsco Friends Meeting Spiritual State of the Meeting Report – Version 4

“How well is PFM acting as a conduit of the Light?” one of our members posed this query.

Acting as a Conduit of Light

A conduit is a means for moving energy like electricity from one place to another. Our Meeting is doing everything it can to move the Light we produce inside our Meeting House out to our families, communities, and the greater world.

Holding that awareness, the light can wax and wane in vocal ministry. Sometimes Spirit speaks through the person and sometimes not. Great conscious conduit of the Light! Some have experienced, when the welcome message is read, a heightened level of vocal ministry that deepens our worship.

For a small, growing Meeting, many of us wear multiple hats. We work very hard to bring Light and Love to all who enter. We can always improve and recognize that every year during our Nomination Calls. We humbly ask questions and request feedback about our Friends experience at PFM. These queries and interviews become another litmus of the flow of Spirit in our Meeting.

Fruits of those intentional conversations have led to several new opportunities for deepening spiritual connection while building knowledge about Quakerism.

Faith & Practice small study groups, and 1:1 Spiritual Friendships are programs that not only build connections between members and attenders, but also foster deeper intimacy. These programs grew out of our Nominating Committee yearly conversations with Friends. Our members and attenders express a desire to be more intimate, and better supported in their faith journey.

Holding second hour sessions have been a way to extend Light outside of our community. What we learn, we can share.

One Friend feels loved and fed when we wish each other the best. It feeds connection to the community and feels real. This year we brought back the potluck lunch! We sense a ministry of generosity that fosters a peaceful environment amongst Friends helping in the kitchen.

For a faith community that does not proselytize, it's hopeful to see young people, children and families coming. Fifteen people signed up for the email list in 2023—these are new people who want to stay in contact with us. What is God leading us to do? Is this a matter of bringing intention?

Staying Connected Virtually

Members share ways virtual connectivity enables them to walk their spiritual journeys –

One Friend said:

“I’ve been attending on zoom since the pandemic and have been so grateful to feel very much a part of the Meeting. It helps so much to keep me from being isolated. It's been a life saver. For me, Wednesday morning worship is a safe environment. I can open my heart to speak what's in my heart. I brought up the New York Times front page article *DEI to Abolish Diversity*. There are not many places I can share my heart so honestly.”

Several Friends who have been attending via Zoom since COVID are grateful to be part of the Meeting, to participate in the Wednesday morning worship, Pendle Hill morning worship, and weekly Meeting for Worship. They feel safe participating in authentic conversations about Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion. Their comfort lies in their relationships within the Meeting.

Some members work on multiple committees and lovingly support the heartbeat of PFM which is possible due to “ZOOM”. They can participate due to the availability and acceptance of remote worship and committee meetings.

Our tech team has worked incredibly hard on fine tuning our hybrid model. Other Meetings have worshipped with us to see how it can be done and use the tech team’s efforts as a model of what works.

Diversity and Racism

“The Light shines on all the different factions, and things we need to work on like a spotlight. We've had conflict arise. It's important not to shy away from it and find ways to talk about it because it's so tender. Not all Quakers are conflict averse,” said one Friend.

Another Friend responded to the third query, “Does our meeting suffer the arrogance of certainty? I'd be shocked if we didn't. I can't remember the last time I told a story where I looked bad. We don't tell stories where we are wrong- where we didn't act heroically. There's a need for vigilance. We judge, see differences. We need reflection.”

The phrase “work-in-progress” fits our meeting! There are a variety of presentations and book studies offered by the Change Group that allow us to open ourselves to issues created by racism.

One member has been surprised at what a bubble we still live in. “My parents brought us up to see social justice issues. I hear “woke,” and yet still note that we have apartheid. I thank the Change Group for moving me to open my eyes.”

Early Friends believed that the Light illuminates both the loving and unloving in each person. Having difficult conversations about racism shows how much we care for each other and value our community and equality.

Practicing the Peace Testimony

There is a sense of peace in the Meeting. Spirit is present, and at times worship feels unified and gathered. Patapsco Friend's Meeting hasn't lost sight of the orientation there is that of God in each one of us. We attempt to interact in a peaceful way and demonstrate this by listening deeply and respecting the opinions of others. If/when interpersonal conflicts arise, M&C reaches out to listen to all concerns, attempting to keep us in right relationship with each other and with Spirit.

Our involvement in community organizations, such as working with refugees and the disadvantaged, serving in the soup kitchen, prison reform,

and supporting those who struggle through PATH, are examples of how we live the peace testimony.

The PFM community works together to ensure our members/attenders are not isolated, which creates a sense of peace and community. There are many at PFM who quietly promote peace in their daily life.

PFM's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business

We acknowledge that it is very difficult to be clerks, so everyone tries to remain positive, encouraging, and supportive of each other. Much organization takes place with the sharing of previous month's minutes and the Clerk requesting agenda items and committee reports ahead of the meeting.

How are we as a community being a conduit of the Light? We need to remind ourselves that it is a Meeting for Worship, with a Concern for Business. At times we can become fixated on the agenda. While we open Meeting for Business with queries and reflections, we need to ask ourselves, "What is God leading us to do together as a community in this moment?" If we keep that broader lens our work will be infused with attention and intention.

Meeting for Business is where we live out our faith as a community. Could our queries and quotes at the beginning of MfB be more meaningful, richer? Can we offer the clerk guidance and resources?

Accolades from within -- Given all the challenges over the past few years, seeing what the Clerks and Assistant Clerks have accomplished is incredible. Someone who rarely attends MfB stated how grateful they were for the level of detail that is in the minutes that are taken for these meetings, and the Spirit that comes through every time. Another member wanted to thank the committee for preparing the Spiritual State of the Meeting report stating that it is a "time consuming and awesome responsibility."

At times, we have had difficulty finding unity, for example, when making decisions about donations to outside organizations. We have had situations where an individual refuses to approve a decision that everyone else

favors, asserting a right to "stand in the way." This can leave those strongly favoring such a decision hurt and even offended, feeling that their concerns have been dismissed. Some have reminded us that there's no veto in Quaker process and ask, "So how can 'standing in the way' be part of Quaker process?" We are collectively tasked to let Spirit guide us to where the gathered body can find unity. That requires us to faithfully share our Spirit-led concerns and just as faithfully release them, trusting that the gathered body has heard them and will follow Spirit's leading to address them. We don't have a shared understanding of good Quaker process when we encounter such situations. Still, we manage to find work-arounds that may leave some dissatisfaction but that allow us to move forward.

In closing, we value this conscious intention to be a conduit of the Light. Many find this to be the essence of our spiritual journey. The opportunity to write the Spiritual State of the Meeting Report allowed us to hold our Meeting in the Light and consider our strengths and weaknesses.

Patuxent Friends Meeting – Lusby, Maryland Spiritual State of the Meeting 2023

Folks at PFM have come here by many different paths, from Birthright Quakers to Convinced Friends to Attenders and Explorers. Many have found our community after disillusionment with a religious group(s) and a long search for belonging. They often speak of walking into their first meeting as an experience of coming home. We remain mindful of the importance of our like-mindedness without slipping into an arrogance of assumption that we all share the same experiences and worldview. Recently, our meeting has grown more demographically diverse, something we deeply appreciate, celebrate, and nurture. We believe strongly that the assumptions of privilege must be confronted and eradicated with love and respect for all parties. As a group of largely older people, we struggle to offer a consistent First Day School program for our meeting's children in a way that does not place the full burden of responsibility on young families. We understand and value both the historical and aspirational nature of Quaker values and the nuance with which they are lived out by each of us. We recently held a Friendly 8's in which one of our members detailed his experience as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, for example, and we support each other as we struggle to wage peace against the many forms of war in our contemporary lives. In general, we attempt to live the statement on our sign and our meetinghouse: All are welcome.

As a small meeting, we recognize and support the individual leadings of our members, who are very active in social justice activities from multiple perspectives: A few are involved in community mediation. Some are working to support vulnerable groups such as LGBTQIA+ teens and those experiencing food and housing insecurity. Others are striving to dismantle racism through the Big Conversation initiative, with our most recent community conversation tackling "The Racial Wealth Gap: Rooted in Land and Home Ownership." Still others are focused on caring for the environment through Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake and an educational water quality monitoring initiative. We contribute beyond our local community as we are able, including supporting the Open International School in Senegal, which was founded by the niece of one of our members.

We also come together as a community to support social justice initiatives including this recent minute, which we sent to our local school board in opposition to an effort to remove from its anti-racism policy language acknowledging white privilege and the legacy of racism in Calvert County Public Schools. The Peace and Social Action Committee is currently planning a second-hour discussion on the war in Gaza in the hopes of documenting our opposition to the loss of innocent life there.

Our Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business truly allows us to conduct our business from a spiritual perspective. We follow structural norms that promote this, especially reading the month's queries at the start of each meeting and practicing silence at the beginning and end of the meeting, as well as after many of our decisions. Many in our community describe the meeting's tone as "patient" and "gentle," with a concern for making sure all voices are heard. Though sometimes we veer off-subject, our process is generally efficient, with roles and duties clearly defined. As a small meeting, we reassure committee members they are not obligated to have something to report every month, but when they do, the norm is to submit reports before MfWCB and have a representative present to provide any needed context or explanation. We value the honesty present in these discussions. Our meetings are rarely contentious, but we do express our frustrations without fear that others will think less of us for not being able to rise above those concerns. We also greatly value the tradition of seasoning decisions until we share a sense of the meeting, and in rare instances, folks have stepped aside when their disagreement conflicted with that shared sense of way forward. Our only concern with MfWCB is that we struggle to get enough people to truly represent the entire meeting as decisions are made.

In all aspects of our spiritual community, we see what love can do.

Spiritual State of the Meeting 2024

During 2023, Richmond Friends Meeting experienced a dramatic renewal of Spirit. We are at an exciting point because of this change and growth.

Our meeting was blessed with new attenders bringing fresh energy. Increased vocal ministry stimulated reflection and shook complacency. We feel an active tension about the increase and shift in vocal ministry, including whether it is spirit-led, the role of discernment for individuals, and the role of eldering. We were reminded that not every message is meant for every person, that an urge to respond is different than a leading to share, and that deep listening reveals the Source behind the message. The generation of young adults among us enlivens the meeting and push the thinking and searching of older Friends. Meeting for worship, we have been reminded, is more than sitting quietly on the benches.

Our meeting is well grounded in practice, yet we struggled with how to convey our process, values, and faith in continuing revelation to newcomers. There is uneasiness among us around the tradition of eldering, and in the recent past, we have been careful to allow people to learn who we are with minimal guidance. We encourage each other to draw upon the wider Quaker community for instruction and renewal. We are grateful for these challenges. We are learning what it means to truly welcome new people into our beloved community. To enrich our collective understanding, we plan to offer a Quakerism 101 series.

During our 11am Meeting, we have adjusted to the soft sounds of children wiggling and whispering and coloring and dropping books during worship. They offer hope to the Spirit of the meeting. Religious Education committee joyfully accepted the care and gentle guidance of our youngest Friends. Our teachers have folded these young people into the larger body, creating shared opportunities to know each other across generations.

To further inclusion, and for our safety and comfort, we have maintained some on-site measures originally set in place during the pandemic. We work diligently to provide hearing assistance and to enable and host hybrid meetings via Zoom for those of us who must be remote due to health or other reasons.

Our 9:30am Meeting for Worship was usually a quiet interlude, soothed by the sound of falling rain or enlivened by bird song through slightly raised windows. Monthly Meeting for Worship under the trees at The Clearing has grown into a sacred space for some of us. Spring and fall retreats at The Clearing also deepened our connection to nature and to each other. At fall retreat, we wrestled with our peace testimony amidst the welling of feelings about the war in Ukraine. In the last months of the year, we sought and did not reach unity in our response to the escalating war and urgent humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Our ad hoc committee on race and racism examined harmful ingrained cultural approaches in powerful sessions, while lifting up the rich contributions and joys of racial diversity. We struggled, and continue to struggle, with the boundaries of our own experiences. Our discussions on race and racism have been a welcome guide to living a life with love.

Some among us find their deepest encounters with Spirit in small gatherings. The openness and honesty of Friends foster life-long friendships and the wish to share that fellowship with newcomers.

We have been faithful in the day-to-day, week-to-week care of our business, our members and attenders, and our properties. Committee work and routine tasks at the meeting house and at The Clearing are offerings of love to our meeting. Care and Counsel committee especially met an unusually high number of needs this past year. Our communal work is central to our existence as a meeting.

Love prospers among us. We cherish each other and we are here for those who look for us.

Roanoke/Lynchburg Spiritual State of the Meeting 2023

There's a chant with these words of hope, "Peace be to you, Peace be to your house, Peace be to all the world." As we consider the state of Roanoke and Lynchburg Meeting, we consider our hopes and steps we can take to achieve these hopes as members of a Meeting, as part of the greater Religious Society of Friends, and within a national and international context.

We are not a large group. In our hybrid worship, about thirty attend in Roanoke and five in Lynchburg (on Zoom and in-person, with the larger number typically in-person). But we are rich in experience. Our number includes a Friend who worked around the world in Quaker political mediation and peacemaking, and one who remembers the stresses and the promise of integration as a Black Southern teen. Some are new to the world of Quakers. Others have served in leadership roles in Yearly Meetings and the Friends General Conference. Our work life has been equally varied. There are subtle differences in background, financial standing and education. This richness enhances the broad knowledge we bring to all aspects of the Quaker experience including informal sharing at potlucks and after meeting. Unfortunately, like many meetings, we lack a strong showing among children or young Friends. Being almost all white and mostly middle or upper-middle class, we want to work on being more welcoming and inclusive.

We are fortunate to have a number of new attenders. Thankfully, we have a strong adult Religious Education program that serves the needs of those who are new to Friends and seasoned Friends alike. We have a reading discussion group for historic Quaker writings and one for social topics. Lynchburg is the site of a historic Meetinghouse and graveyard on the grounds of a Presbyterian church. A Quaker is represented on this site's committee taking part in presentations about Quaker history hosted there.

We take outreach seriously, both as individual members and as a Meeting. Our Peace and Social Justice Committee is actively engaged. The Meeting devotes one-third of the unrestricted donations from the previous year to support Peace and Social Justice initiatives. Working closely with the Roanoke NAACP and the Roanoke City Police Department, the Meeting takes a central role in Groceries Not Guns, a gun buyback program. We support members' involvement with groups like the NAACP, the ecumenical Roanoke Reparations Group, and the Roanoke Asylum Seekers Support Network.

Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business is well attended with an average attendance of a dozen or more. Each Business Meeting begins with a reminder to wait to be acknowledged by the Clerk before speaking, listen deeply, allow for silence between responses, and speak only once until all who wish to have contributed. The Meeting is framed by centering worship and begins with worship sharing on a query to set the tone.

When Friends were asked to share an image or metaphor that captures the spiritual state of our Meeting, they responded with a rich variety of pictures. Our Meeting is:

- A solid American square brick house – A pebble dropped in water – An umbrella with the center post of our worship room holding up the roof under which we gather.
- A high-wire bicycle act.
- A garden with God as the sun.
- The Yin-Yang symbol – Not either or, but both and.
- A compass.

We know our Meeting supports our attempts to live up to our corporate and individual efforts to live as a Quaker community even though we sometimes stumble as we go. We are comfortable being uncomfortable since we are part of a tender and beloved community that ministers and gives comfort during times of individual or community discomfort.

We take seriously Quaker Bayard Rustin's statement that "we need a group of angelic troublemakers" and are grateful to be part of such a caring yet challenging group.

Sandy Spring Friends Meeting 2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report **Approved at April 2024 Meeting for Business**

We rejoice in coming together in community. Meeting for worship is a source of comfort, mutual compassion in times of trouble, deep spiritual contemplation, and joy in each other and in the spirit. "I appreciate the fleeting moments. Kids coming to meeting from First Day School after they run in snow flurries and make shelter together."

Friends have spoken about the simple delight in experiencing one's own thoughts in meeting. We see and recognize a friend with simple joy as they enter the meetinghouse and sit with us.

And when we leave the meetinghouse, the experience of meeting for worship lingers. "I like walking outside, enjoying the walk and the talk. I look for small miracles. Our work is loving the world (Mary Oliver "Messenger"). I weed in the rain garden and talk with the other weeders about challenges like how to deal with adult children." We see joyful karate students or Irish musicians and dancers using the Lyceum. We welcome the wider Sandy Spring community to our boisterous Halloween party. We get ready for the Christmas pageant and take joy in preparing and in participating. We join hands and walk together through the world, our deep connection to spirit guiding us as we take actions of conscience both large and small that may be inspired by that spiritual connection our meeting for worship nurtures.

We have spent a lot of time learning from each other, in First Day School and in Meetings for Learning, and we gain more than just knowledge from each other as we learn. Friends listen but also question and engage with great vibrancy and discussion. Our committees, our special programs, our outreach to the community, our shared meals, our calls and letters to each other, our chance meetings during the week; all of these contribute to the spiritual wholeness of our community. It is easy to understand why there is such love for our community expressed when we gather to consider the spiritual state of the meeting.

There is still much we can do as a community to be more welcoming. We value the work done by the Change Group, whose addendum to this report speaks to us clearly about the need in our community to respond to racism, honor differences in experience, and promote inclusiveness. These challenges will continue to affect our meeting, and our ability to engage with them whole-heartedly will have a profound effect on the state of our meeting's spirit in years to come.

This work is not always easy, and it can be difficult to find the joy in meeting when the challenges lead to disagreement. Indeed, our community is not free of discord, worry, or challenge. We remember in these moments that even a message spoken in anger is a message from God. We disagree about how to use our financial resources, and that disagreement affects the spirit of our meeting as well. We have lingering discomfort and worry from changes we made during the pandemic. We use Zoom to enhance our participants in meeting for worship, and have more methods and opportunities to worship at Sandy Spring than ever before -- and this leads us to feel fragmented. For some, Zoom impinges on the worship experience.

We feel a deep and abiding concern and even worry for the future of our meeting, for the Religious Society of Friends, and for spiritual life in the world as a whole. We cannot know what spiritual nurture future generations will desire from our community. We are anxious and together seek a centered quiet.

Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting Change Group
Addendum to 2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report
April 2024

Change Group hosted the following activities:

Juneteenth Celebration at the Oddfellows Hall with friends from Sharp Street United Methodist Church.

Three (of five) consultations with Crossroads focused on how Change Group can be more effective in facilitating change in our Meeting.

Over the summer in preparation for Baltimore Yearly Meeting Annual Session, Change Group offered the Meeting community two reading sessions on Zoom, focusing on the Pendle Hill Pamphlets of Harold Weaver, "Race, Systemic Violence, and Retrospective Justice" and Vanessa Julye, "Radical Transformation: Long Overdue for the Religious Society of Friends."

American Indian Society of DC (AIS) is an inter-tribal friendship and service group rather than an advocacy group. Membership is open to all and encouraged. It was shared with a Change Group member following their event (craft fair & fundraiser) held at SSMM in December that the AIS event coordinators and officers felt very welcomed by SSMM folks. It was a swell experience for them and they made about \$1,000 which is a sizeable amount of money for an organization that runs on a shoe string. The vendors were satisfied too. A couple of SSMM folks enjoyed the organization's intimate, lively, and friendly pot luck meal which included a beautiful prayer of gratitude from a (vendor) family including singing and drumming. In addition, the coordinator, Tracey, singled out a member of the change group as a key factor in everything working smoothly at the end.

In addition, related activities included:

Remembering our Friend Bette Hoover. Her memorial service was filled with messages of the work of the Change Group. Our internal remembrance focused on how her spirit continues to inspire us.

Junior Young Friends/Young Friends are creating a world for themselves where gender diversity, neurodiversity and being anti-racist are celebrated with joy. They regularly attend services at Sharp Street United Methodist Church and participate in service projects with the youth group at the church.

Our Meeting for Business and many of our committees at their monthly meetings continue to read our anti-racism query. This practice leads to productive sharing and discussions. We regularly discuss updating it.

Shepherdstown Friends Meeting
Spiritual State of the Meeting
Report for 2023

This report reflects input from several discussions of the queries offered by Baltimore Yearly Meeting. Shepherdstown Friends Meeting continues to thrive as a positive and sustained spiritual community. We celebrate our connections and the time spent together in worship.

Our Meetings for Worship With Attention to Business function well and follow an agenda that is sent out before the meeting. The meetings are hybrid allowing the participation of Friends who are unable to attend in person. We are now using the BYM queries for each month but would be interested to learn from other meetings how they use queries to deepen their worship. At times our MfWWAtB runs on too long and members begin to leave before the agenda is complete.

Shepherdstown Friends Meeting adopted a minute concerning the Israel Palestine War (see attached). As part of the discernment we developed a list of activities we could do to promote peace in our community. We will continue to implement these ideas in 2024. We know that we need to understand the history, culture and grievances of all groups when engaging in peacebuilding and that our most powerful tools are deep listening and love. Our first follow-up to this was to hold a Vigil for Peace on March 29, 2024 attended by over fifty people.

We acknowledge that we have many subtle prejudices but we also recognize that we do not have to be perfect; that we are a work in progress and that it is too easy to be judgmental. We note that our meeting is not immune to political divides and that some Friends feel uncomfortable with political discussions that arise at close of worship. At least one Friend is no longer attending meeting because of tensions around these issues. We identify that some discomfort arises from the tension between quietism and activism. We know we must strive to become a safe place for difficult conversations by focusing on deep listening and compassion for everyone who attends our meeting. The sense of the meeting is that there is a need for healing, reconciliation and work to be truly inclusive.

Our meeting continues to support and participate in the monthly Vigil for Racial Justice in Martinsburg but even with our good intentions and commitment to racial justice there is much we don't know about how white privilege affects others. We need to dig more deeply into what it means to belong and how Quaker process can make it difficult for some individuals to fully participate with us. We reflected on the query "How can we address racism more deeply?" Some suggested that we invite people of color to meet with us. As we reflected further we recognized the difficulty of being the only person of color in the room and that we might learn more if we become involved with groups where we, as white Quakers, would be the minority. We will continue to strive to be more inclusive and welcoming to all.

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report from State College Friends Meeting (April 2024)

For our yearly state of the meeting report to the Philadelphia and Baltimore yearly meetings, the State College Friends Meeting bypassed the suggested queries and instead chose queries we thought would help us understand where our meeting stands in this time and in this place. We settled on three queries:

1. What do you see as this meeting's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges?
2. Who are we now and who would we like to become as a meeting?
3. What would make it feasible for you to participate in the life of the meeting by attending business meeting?

We gave Friends three opportunities to answer these questions: a called in person meeting on Sunday, April 14th; a called Zoom meeting on Tuesday, April 16th; and in writing.

What do you see as this meeting's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges?

1. Strengths

In considering our strengths, Friends gravitated toward two occasionally overlapping themes: wisdom and community. Under the heading of wisdom, Friends expressed gratitude for those who have been part of the meeting for years, have accumulated storehouses of knowledge about the meeting itself and life in general, and were willing to share that wisdom with others. Friends also appreciated the Quakerism 101 and adult education classes we organized, which provided insight into the history of Quakers, globally and locally, and more provocative discussions of Quaker testimonies and commitments.

By far, though, Friends treasured the community that has arisen in our meeting. By community, we meant a number of things:

- the feeling that Friends really care about each other, as embodied in the recently established Pastoral Care committee;
- the Quaker Life Committee of our Friends School, which strengthens the Quaker commitments of the school;
- the Spiritual Friendship circles, in which Friends discuss what they believe and how they arrived at what they believe;
- the commitment to the good of the community, whether in small local ways or larger but still local efforts like the Climate Justice Working Group;
- and the diversity of viewpoints (from believers to non-theists) the meeting not just tolerates but welcomes.

Finally, we noted that after the damage COVID did to attendance, the meeting is growing again, including the (welcome) arrival of families with small children.

2. Weaknesses

Many of the weaknesses we identified overlap with Opportunities and Challenges, discussed below. Nevertheless, we say a word about them here. Some Friends do not feel like we are deepening our spiritual lives, others that we are not representing our faith to the community. Many of us would like to see more diversity in the Meeting by actively welcoming more than just white middle class members, who seem heavily overrepresented. Finally, and in a comment that will reappear under Challenges, many Friends believe that some do more than their fair share of the work needed to keep the Meeting alive.

3. Opportunities

One friend noted that our commitment to the peace testimony may have lapsed, which is unfortunate given the world of ongoing wars we live in and the history of pacifism and conscientious objection among Quakers. As mentioned under Weaknesses, many Friends believe we could do a better job representing our faith in the community and reaching out to others, including Penn State students. For that to happen, Friends may need to become less insular and more open about their beliefs. Finally, and on that score, our practices (silence) and testimonies ought to appeal to a lot of people—the latent Quakers, as we call them.

4. Challenges

Friends noted two challenges. First, we provide few opportunities to learn how others have conducted their spiritual journeys and how we might learn from what they have learned along those journeys. Second, and above all, the need to get younger people to participate in the life of the meeting, including its various committees, whether Pastoral Care, Religious Education, or Worship and Ministry.

Who are we now and who would we like to become as a meeting?

This query elicited many of the same responses the first query did. After the challenges of COVID, many Friends feel relieved that our numbers are growing again. We would like to keep growing and to see more younger and active people attending meeting. Although the Pastoral Care committee has done good work, some Friends feel like we could do still more to encourage others to ask for help when they need it. We want to be a meeting where people feel like they can trust in and count on each other.

By far, though, Friends wanted to do a better job of communicating to others who we are and what we believe. Too often, Friends have to insist on what they are not: the Quaker Oats man, the Amish, or some other spiritual tradition, like the Shakers, that passed long ago. Instead of asserting what we are not, we need to state, more clearly and more passionately, our testimonies and commitments. Some Friends found an analogy for this need in our commitment to silence. It is not the absence of sound but the listening for revelation. We suggested a number of ways to take this opportunity:

- More t-shirts that say, “This is what a Quaker looks like.”
- A podcast devoted to living the Quaker life in our embattled world.
- A “Bring a Friend to Friends Meeting Day.”

Regardless, we all felt that what Quakerism offers—our testimonies, which are in step with social justice, and our emphasis on silence in a noisy world—should appeal to others. In sum, and in the language of the New Testament, we feel like we need to stop hiding our candle under a bushel.

What would make it feasible for you to participate in the life of the meeting by attending business meeting?

For years, our meeting has struggled to persuade all but the usual suspects to attend Business Meeting. Since Business Meeting is crucial to the life of the meeting, we periodically revisit this question. As usual, we discussed different modes for Business Meeting (in-person versus hybrid versus exclusively Zoom) and different times to meet. One friend mentioned that at his previous meeting, once a month Business Meeting substituted for what would have been regular meeting for worship. Two of the more promising ideas were (1) to streamline the meetings by adopting a consent agenda, wherein more mundane parts of committee reports would be circulated in advance and discussion reserved for what requires discernment and (2) to do a better job conveying to the meeting as a whole what Business Meeting entails, that it is an important part of the life of the meeting, and that it can be a spiritual practice unto itself.

Although, as this report attests, the State College Friends Meeting has its share of weaknesses and challenges, as does any branch of organized religion at this moment, our meeting matters intensely to those who share in it and, so long as it continues to do so, we feel certain we can address those weaknesses and overcome those challenges. Indeed, that our called meetings and this report devoted so much more space—and time—to Strengths and Opportunities bodes well for our future.

Addendum I

2024 Climate Questions for Spiritual State of the Meeting reports- SCFM

1. How is spirit guiding SCFM as we experience and address climate change and issues of climate justice?
2. How do we keep this concern in our presence in the midst of our busy lives?

How has Meeting addressed the action items raised by the Playbook- particularly as to the 5 action areas around climate change?

SCFM's Climate Justice Working Group's (CJWG) led our meeting's climate actions (from Fall 2019 through July 2023) were shared at PYM 2023 Annual Sessions and a poster of SCFM Climate Actions was posted in SCFM bulletin board in Social Rm from 8.23 to present

Advocacy/Activism

- Harvested burdock root & sent to Singularity Botanicals Apr. 2023; maintain herbal medicine garden year-round for use in Chester County's African American community
- Tabled for CJWG at Lion Bash (town and gown street fair) in Aug. 2023 - met PA House Representative Paul Takac
- Rep. Paul Takac presentation on Climate Action in PA government on 1.18.24; co-sponsored by Foxdale's Climate Care and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committees and State College Friends Meeting Adult Religious Education and Climate Justice Working Group committees. Presentation recording posted on CJWG webpage <https://www.statecollegefriends.org/climate-justice-working-group>
- Local gathering of local environmental groups potluck at the Unitarian Fellowship on 3.15.24 to present on climate actions of CJWG
- Develop and maintain native plant and pollinator gardens on the meetinghouse grounds.
 - *Planning a Community Climate Action Conversation at SCFM in 2024*
- *Planning a Meetinghouse Social Hour chat on Apr. 21 - what are people doing; their concerns; what do they want to know?*

Education

- QEW workshop 1.11.23 - Living In Right Relationship With The Living World: Quaker Testimonies As A Template?
- QEW workshop 2.23.23 - Restoring Life And Hope: Renewing Biodiversity, Mind, Body, And Spirit

- QEW workshop 3.16.23 - Financial and Economic Roots of the Climate Emergency
- QEW workshop 4.16.23 - Way Forward: Care for the Earth
- Life without Plastics: 100 suggestions - info. is posted on our Social Room bulletin board starting 2.24
- *Planning a CJWG booth at a town wide Earth Day Celebration April 20th 2024 from 12-4pm with information from 4 local churches' climate actions, rock painting activity and a Climate Quiz from THIS*
<https://thisiswhatwedid.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/QuizPDF31August2021.pdf>

Climate Footprint Reduction

- Honeycomb insulating shades installed on windows in Social Rm and Kitchen in fall 2022
- *Working on a Voluntary transportation carbon onset to go into our Meetinghouse Carbon Reduction Fund*
- *SCFM Meetinghouse Carbon Footprint Reduction choices for discernment with Buildings & Grounds Committee (then to be labored with SCFM membership)*
 1. *Add insulation in 2 areas – 1) the ceilings of Mtng Rm & Social Rm; 2) under kitchen and in basement closet*
 2. *Consider replacing the Anderson windows in the Meeting rm. or get storm windows to reduce heat loss*
 3. *Rebuild Social Rm sliding glass door (leaks air)*
 4. *Mow less lawn options for ¼ of our 3 acres - perhaps a ground mounted solar array with native perennial meadow below*

Finances

- Finances & Climate Action information up on Social Rm bulletin board from 1.23 on & announced at rise of Meeting
 - EQAT's Never Vanguard Campaign
 - Th!rd Act's Campaign to defund Big Banks investing in fossil fuels
 - Bank for Good - positive values banking
 - As You Sow information site about what our investments are funding
- Using Finances for Action on Climate slideshow presentation done at Upper Susquehanna Quarter Fall Family Gathering 9.20.23
- Climate Racism slideshow presentation done at Upper Susquehanna Quarter Fall Family Gathering 9.19.23

Mourning Loss & Finding Hope

- Mourning Loss and Finding Hope Workshop at Millville MM 11.5.23

- 1. Are SCFM members and attenders aware of the 5 action areas developed by the Climate Sprint, Eco-Justice Collaborative, Climate Witness Stewards and PYM in the Climate Playbook?**
- 2. How can we raise awareness and inspire action in response to climate change and climate justice in our faith community?**
- 3. As Quakers, are we remembering to tenderly hold the earth and all life on earth in the light?**
- 4. Are we respectfully listening to each other, knowing that we need our whole community to discern way forward?**

Has your meeting appointed a climate witness liaison? Yes, Jackie functions as SCFM liaison.

Addendum II

Religious Education

The children's religious education program has been lively, loving and joyful. There have been 26+ children (14 families) who have participated over the course of this past year, and most of the families have participated as regularly as young families can, while some come to just special events. Our program focuses on our Quaker testimonies: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship, while activities include games, poetry, cooking, crafts, camping, acting and community service. Our children are a respectful and caring group who are sharing their Light in very loving ways. As our program grows, our Religious Education traditions become stronger, our testimonies become more tangible, and our families are starting to integrate into other committees of Meeting, becoming vital to our future.

2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

Baltimore Monthly Meeting Stony Run

Queries from Baltimore Yearly Meeting

- What are the best practices of your meeting's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business that you could share with other meetings? In what way do you think your Meeting for Worship for Concern for Business falls short?
- Does your meeting suffer the arrogance of certainty? For example, does your meeting have subtle prejudices for those unlike them?
- The whole world seems at war now. How does the Quaker peace testimony live in your meeting? How do your members practice the peace testimony?

Meeting for Worship is one of our spiritual centers. Our meetings are often tender, and our time in worship and fellowship joyful. Perhaps the jewel of our worship experience is the ten-minute period before the rise of meeting that is designated as a time when we speak out of silence to hold those we are concerned about in the Light or to ask the Meeting to hold us in the Light. These moments invite us to seek the care of the meeting in a loving and respectful way.

Although we desire to extend this care and respect into our Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business, we find that it is not easy. We begin business meetings with queries and provide time for reflection and response before moving on to the agenda. We also read the Anti-Racist Queries of the Meeting before we consider matters before the Meeting that require decision making. We find that in the conduct of business we do not always agree on the path forward. Some of us see sharing our perspectives based on our experiences in less than a positive light; others see it as a process that strengthens outcomes and is consistent with the anti-racism queries. As we sit with differences in perspectives, the practice of calling for silence in a moment of difference has been helpful. We acknowledge that there is work to be done just as we acknowledge that engaging more members in this important time of worship will strengthen connections to each other and to the life and work of the Meeting.

We live in changing times, but we are fortunate to be aware of the fallacy in the notion that there is one version of God and ours is the one true version. We do tend to see this notion as narrow and self-possessed, but we still wrestle with the "arrogance of certainty" when we are called upon to consider the more egalitarian statement that our version of God is neither more wonderful nor more sacred than another person's version. In a sense, our relationship with Friends Church of Baltimore highlights the need for us to be more open to the different interpretations we give to the world and to religion. Our meeting has been privileged that many international Quakers in Baltimore chose Stony Run as their meeting after they immigrated to the United States. We understand that differences exist in unprogrammed and programmed meetings and in the *Faith and Practice* documents of various Yearly Meetings. We understand

that there are differences in the way we practice our faith and the way we worship. We also understand that Friends all over the world cherish and yearn to practice their versions of their faith. While we and international Friends share many commonalities and come together in community and fellowship, Stony Run acknowledges and supports their need for self-determination. However, we seek to always welcome all fellow Quakers with goodwill, and we will also respect their deliberations and decisions on essential matters of faith and practice.

It is our custom to capture in this report elements or functions that have demonstrated notable growth during the year. The meeting has experienced an increase in the attendance of families with young children. At Simple Lunch, our children remain connected as they sit together in community on the closed porch adjacent to the dining room. We recognize the efforts of members who have brought innovation and energy to **Religious Education** and those who attend workshops and collaboratives in search of initiatives to support this work. Our **Culture and Outreach Working Group** has helped increase fellowship in our community by welcoming newcomers, sponsoring adult educational forums, increasing our social media presence, and encouraging greater participation by members and attenders. The **Library Committee** has worked to broaden our collection of works that explore LGBTQIA+ and anti-racism themes. **The Working Group on Friends School** continues its efforts to build an understanding of roles and relationships with Friends School of Baltimore.

We recognize that in so many places the world does seem to be at war. We are also deeply aware of the discordant voices in our own country and our own communities. For us, ending war and international conflict may seem like a lofty and almost unreachable goal. However, we do understand that there are actions that we can take that will contribute to the healing of fellow beings and to our own healing. Examples of our aspiration to reach across the world to assist others are efforts by the **Stony Run Friends and Supporters of the Friends Women Association** to support of the Ntaseka Medical Clinic Maternity Ward in Burundi and their work with Children's Peace Libraries in Rwanda. At home, **Our Peace and Justice Committee** maintains connections to national, regional and local organizations that promote peace, justice, and equality and that support and actively work to achieve equity, access, and opportunity. While seeking answers about how to create a more peaceful world, we hope that the ways we strive to bring peace and wellbeing to our own lives will give support and hope to others.

The year 2023 brought changes in our meeting that come with the passage of time. New members and attenders join with us in worship and fellowship; different individuals in our community have emerged to take on leadership roles; historical relationships with institutions in our circle of Friends change as new understandings evolve. We expect changes to come and that they will affect our lives. We understand that we must sometimes live with uncertainty and that finding the way forward requires difficult and sometimes relentless work. Yet, we will go forward with courage and confidence that when we gather, our meetings will often be tender, and our time in worship and fellowship joyful.

Takoma Park Preparative Meeting Spiritual State of the Meeting Report 2024

1. What are best practices of your meeting's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business (MfWCB) that you could share with other meetings? In what way do you think your MfWCB falls short?
 - a. We read and discuss the monthly Queries from Faith and Practice at the beginning of business meeting. The discussion follows a worship sharing format, and provides an opportunity for us to listen to each other.
 - b. We approve minutes immediately. This practice helps ensure that the minutes reflect the sense of the meeting, and also relieve the burden on the recording clerk, since there is no need to do further work on the minutes after the meeting.
 - c. Attendance at business meeting could be better.
 - d. Adelphi monthly meeting's document on business meeting provides a good guide, which we could benefit from studying and following.
2. The whole world seems at war now. How does the Quaker peace testimony live in your meeting? How do your members practice the peace testimony?
 - a. The ongoing wars are a concern for our meeting members, but we have not done anything collectively as a meeting, but members have participated in activities organized by other meetings.
 - b. Individual members attempt to practice the peace testimony at a local or personal level.
3. Does your meeting suffer the arrogance of certainty? For example, does your meeting have subtle prejudices for those unlike them?
 - a. This does not seem to have been an issue in practice for us, but neither have we experienced a large influx of visitors which might present such a challenge.
4. Tell how your meeting's walk with Spirit informs our understanding of racism and how you are meant to live?
 - a. We recognize that racism is ingrained in our society.
 - b. We participate in Adelphi's anti-racism efforts.

State of Society Report 2023

Valley Friends Meeting - Baltimore Yearly Meeting

We are grateful for the gifts of the past Year. Often individual Friends express with gratitude that they have found a safe 'home' at Valley Friends, where we are each part of a welcoming community, and where each person is free to hold their particular Spiritual understanding while joining together in common values and a desire to live more fully into our beliefs.

Business Meeting Practices:

Friends expressed overall satisfaction with our Meetings for Worship w/Concern for Business. We try to stay focused and to hold meetings to an hour. Our three committees, the foundation of our functioning, (Worship & Religious Education, Property & Finance and Care & Connection) met regularly and came prepared to report. All who wished to speak were welcomed.

We consulted outside the group for information as needed, such as with financial practices with concerns regarding the ownership of our solar panels.

A core of approximately half of our Meeting community participated regularly. We want to extend invitations to those newer to Meeting to encourage broader participation. We want to highlight that participation in Meetings for business is a further experience of being open to the Light and to spiritual leadings.

We noted that participation in Meetings for Business is "part of the package"- of being part of our community, and Friends practice. Business meetings are a spiritual practice, being present by listening for the inner voice, attending to how we treat each other and listening to the concerns that are brought to Meeting.

Living Friends Peace Testimony:

Our Peace Testimony comes from honoring That of God in Everyone; thus we seek peaceful ways of responding to each other. We shun violence and doing harm to another person – not only physical harm. We are about truth telling and seeking justice for all. Courage is required to challenge those in authority when they are going against principles of peace and justice.

As a small Meeting we did not initiate activities, but participated in community peace gatherings and justice witnesses. We participated in the Valley Inter-Faith Alliance gatherings which focused on creating change in our local community. We continued to provide scholarships to the EMU Peace and Justice Program and supported an additional student with housing. Many of us committed to creating a new FCNL

advocacy team. We participated in the local Gay Pride celebration with our presence; giving out origami peace cranes, and literature.

Through discussions and readings we are educating ourselves regarding the Israel/Gaza situation. We have discussed our response during multiple 2nd Hours. We feel we want to speak out for the end of humanitarian suffering, and conclude that we must listen to the concerns and experiences of both parties, without taking sides.. Education is key to hearing and understanding the other

We ask “Are we continuing to be mindful that there are multiple conflicts w/ great suffering occurring in our world.

Peace begins in our own hearts and grows from there. It is manifest in our most personal relationships, within families and within our meeting. Part of being peaceful is building trust. How do we know when we may have offended another person? During reflections for this Report we became aware that in some instances Friends have felt hurt or diminished by other’s responses. Learning to inform others when we have been offended is part of our responsibility as is learning to observe and pay attention to signs that we may have offended another and to seek to understand and make amends. We look to the coming year to gain skills in communicating clearly and in taking responsibility for seeking clarity if we experience offense.

Does Meeting suffer from the arrogance of certainty?

We appreciate the challenge of this query (unusual for SoS reports). After reflection we noted a possibility of being dismissive towards those Faith practices which seem hierarchical or programmed/with pastors. We note the usefulness of continuing to explore this more fully. For much of the year we were joined in worship by a Friends pastor from Kenya and were enlightened by her company and her expression of her Christian Quaker Faith.

We remind ourselves of the gift of Clearness Committees and honor that Friends Practice. We want to do better at holding this opportunity up for each other, and to note it can be for clearness in many areas, and interpersonal struggles, not only for major life choices .

Tell how your meeting’s walk with Spirit informs your understanding of racism and how you are meant to live.

We work to learn how to see the light in every one/each person. We take shelter from extreme views, and are reminded to say not “we believe”, but “from my perspective, I believe...”

Specific – Racism happens around us, and we want to be prepared to express that each person is a child of god.

BYM asks us to consider our awareness of racism and how we engage w/this issue –

We feel deep concern w/the complex issues of Climate Change – and wonder that this is not addressed in the SoS Queries. Global warming is disruptive of all life. All life on earth is precious, not just human life.

Our Meeting community is nourished by regular 2nd hours- reflection, learning, fellowship, and activities. A vibrant monthly Newsletter keeps us informed and enriched. We have a monthly women's group which has fostered connection and shared reflection on a variety of subjects and issues.

Lacks:

We do not often participate in or connect w/ other Area Meetings.

Limited attendance in youth RE creates a cycle with the departure of some families looking for wider youth resources –resulting in even fewer youth -

Public Witness :

Table at Harrisonburg Pride Day
Participate in Valley Interfaith Alliance
vigils and gatherings
One of us attended FGC '23

Transitions:

Luca Nieto – HS Graduate

Ellie Peeks HS Graduate (Lincoln Nebraska)

We miss the presence of Don and Lois Crawford (who moved away) but continue to be engaged via internet

One member no longer able to attend due to health issues

Some activities of Note:**2 nd hours:**

Singing

Exploring Queries

Quaker History

One of us attended FGC '23

Quaker practice in every day life

Annual Christmas Candlelight worship

“What are you afraid of?”

Book – “Adam”

Learning about Israel/Gaza history and current situation

Rock Painting as an expression of Spirit

Warrington Monthly Meeting 2024 State of the Meeting Report

It's been said that there's not really a universal story. For example, how can a white male experience or tell the story of a woman of color.

But perhaps there are universal experiences, or chapters, in people's lives. The birth of a loved one. The joy of a loved one's successes. Caring for a loved one with health care needs. And perhaps more.

While our time at Warrington is relatively short in the grand scheme of things, it has given us time to grow together as a community. And time to share, and support each other, through our universal and individual experiences.

As we grow as a community, which is a good thing, we need to be mindful of not becoming too insular. We need to open to new attenders and visitors, and welcome them into our community, if we're to grow as people, as a community, and as a Meeting.

History has given us a strong foundation to build on. Our goal is to build something worthy of the foundation.

Williamsburg Friends Meeting
Spiritual State of the Meeting Report
January – December, 2023

Business Meetings: *What are best practices of your meeting's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business that you could share with other meetings? In what way do you think your MfWCB falls short?*

Meetings for worship with a concern for business are run smoothly with an agenda set by the clerk. It was noted that sometimes we discuss something and a decision gets made, but then the ball gets dropped. Remembering to make sure someone is assigned to follow through with specific actions will be helpful.

We begin our business meeting by reading one of the queries and a few advices and voices selected by the clerk. Friends are then given time to respond in a worship sharing format. There is a concern that this process lengthens our business meetings and people may not be staying because of the time commitment. But, as this is the only time we set aside to discuss the testimonies, some are reluctant to give up this practice. We will continue in a process of discernment around this issue.

Peace Testimony: *The whole world seems to be at war now. How does the Quaker peace testimony live in your meeting? How do your members practice the peace testimony?*

Our community's interest in social witness and coordinated peace and justice efforts has never been strong, and this was true in 2023. There is some interest in pushing us, as a group, to engage in social action. Concerns for events in the world and in our community are expressed in vocal ministry, but not in gathered activities. More collective endeavors, particularly in peace and justice projects, could strengthen our meeting and make our presence more visible in the larger community.

We embrace the phrase, "contemplation without action is incomplete." But our meeting is diverse and some Friends are called to prioritize contemplation and gathering over activism. We are also a small group and live within a wide geographical area, which makes it difficult to plan group projects.

One Friend shared the quote, "Shine a light in a corner of the world where you live." This seems to describe some of our members and attenders. As individuals we live the peace testimony in many intentional ways. Some Friends are able to donate money to various organizations and causes, some work silently to be kind to strangers, to offer a listening ear and nourishing soup to those in need. Some of us work for peace by gardening, raising honey bees, volunteering at a dog shelter, writing poetry, caring for an ill family member, making beautiful pots, teaching English as a second language, lobbying our state legislature, calling our representatives and senators, attending peace and human rights rallies, and speaking up at work about small but insidious racist and sexist slurs or behaviors.

A member of our meeting is our representative to a local ecumenical group called *HART - Historic Area Religions Together* - that seeks to bring together clergy from many religious traditions. Friends attended an Iftar hosted by a local Muslim group to celebrate the end of a day of fasting during Ramadan. Others came to an Ecumenical Thanksgiving service. Some Friends are integrating Buddhist mindfulness practices into their worship to help them stay grounded in present reality.

We return to meeting to center ourselves, to ask if what we're doing comes from a real concern or is ego-driven. Our Quaker community keeps us anchored and buoyed. One Friend summed it up beautifully when he said, "Wherever we go we take our meeting with us." We believe our small, individual efforts do indeed bring peace to the world.

The Arrogance of Certainty: *Does your meeting suffer from the arrogance of certainty? For example, does your meeting have subtle prejudices for those unlike them?*

Williamsburg Friends are aware that, at times, we embody the arrogance of certainty – sometimes not in subtle ways. Who among us hasn't asked, "How can anyone believe...?" It's easy for us to rest on our laurels and believe our path to peace is the right way. This certainty creates arrogance that can easily intensify when shared with others who think as we do. One Friend suggested that when she says, "I *hope* my path leads to peace," she opens herself to be a humble seeker and not an arrogant know-it-all. This leads her to explore more opportunities for growth and spiritual development.

Other Friends pray for those whose ideas and policies frighten and anger them. They hold these people in the Light asking that their hearts might be opened to let in the Spirit of Love, Light and a bigger table for all.

We are left to ponder how best to know that of God in everyone (no exceptions) while at the same time finding ways to stand up to institutions and social systems that seek to oppress, deprive and control others.

Understanding of Racism: *Tell how your meeting's walk with Spirit informs our understanding of racism and how you are meant to live?*

Addendum: *Describe specific ways your meeting works to become an anti-racist and justice-seeking community.*

Williamsburg Friends are often guided by Spirit to speak up and act when they encounter racist comments or ideas. Whereas once we might have let a racist comment drift past us in a social gathering, we are now too aware of the pain inflicted by racism to ignore it. We've become aware of micro-aggressions and the many layers of white privilege that most of us enjoy.

Some of this growth comes in response to a series of second hour discussions on racism that were held during the pandemic. These were stopped when some folks felt saturated and wanted to discuss other topics. We know that we must push ourselves out of our comfort zones in order to talk again more deeply about this topic. We hope to bring back these discussions in 2024.

One Friend is active in a local anti-racism group called *All Together*. She maintains a Black Lives Matter lemonade stand at our local farmer's market, where other members of our meeting volunteer. This Friend has joined the BYM racial justice committee and brings us reports of their activities

We've also learned that when we focus on our own spiritual development and our resistance to that development, our awareness of racism and other injustices becomes clearer, and we are led to bring that growth to bear on our daily lives.

In Addition...

We now have an active online community with a number of people joining via Zoom for worship and other activities. Having a hybrid meeting makes us think more carefully about community and how we create it. To that end, those of us in the room are making an effort to stand, if we are able, and move close to the microphone before delivering a message or announcement. We want all to feel welcome and cared for. We are aware of and grateful that the challenges of the pandemic encouraged us to expand our connectedness in this way.

We're thankful that we can share our space with other community groups - at this point a survivors of suicide group, a poetry collective, the board of *All Together* and a Friend who helps former felons restore their voting rights. We're also glad for the connections and friendships we are developing with the Unitarians.

Our second hour discussions experienced a boost in 2023 when the coordinators asked Friends to come up with and prepare topics to discuss. Several Friends chose QuakerSpeak videos, which led to open and honest conversations about our spiritual lives and how we try to live our beliefs.

Our Spiritual Formation Program was also strengthened this past fall after several Friends attended the retreat. We are now asking members to attend both the large reading group and a small discussion group. Both venues seem to have more energy and commitment.

We experienced some transitions in 2023. A few Friends have moved away and are greatly missed. We've also added some people who have brought new energy and interests to our group. Friends and their family members continue to have medical issues, and we work hard to respond with offers of specific help and spiritual sustenance.

We ask, "What lights me up?" Levity and humor are tonic to our weary souls. Potlucks bring us joy and connecting fellowship. We've continued to hold our Thursday night check-ins on zoom. There is no agenda and while the conversation always makes room for those with struggles or concerns, it often ends in joke telling, funny stories and a general sense of being relaxed and open with each other. We actually had fun gathering to clean our meeting house, and there is talk of a social gathering that might even include a game of charades!

The relationships we have with each other and the camaraderie we feel are a serious glue that binds us together. Our meeting is small, but our community is strong.

2023 Spiritual State of the Meeting York Monthly Meeting

“What business do I have being at business meeting?” was a question jokingly asked by an attender. After the laughter quieted, Friends thoughtfully answered: “It’s a time when we record our history and progress on issues that are central to our Faith. It’s a time when the Spiritual intertwines with the practical. It’s a place where we try to put our Quaker beliefs into corporate practice. It’s a place where we find unity (or not) to share our resources with the world beyond.”

Monthly Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business have been held in good order throughout 2023. We find that our practice of having a different volunteer each month sitting “head of Meeting”, rather than a traditional “Clerk”, meets our needs. The designated Friend develops the agenda from input suggestions and the usual reports from our Treasurer, Building and Grounds and Social Concerns leaders. The business agenda is prefaced with queries and historic “Voices” with time for reflection, after which we hear “News of Friends”. Monthly Meeting is accomplished on the first First Day of every month at 9AM to 10:45 AM.

Additional times of spiritual growth occur on the second First Day of each month at 9:30. We have a “Writing Table” at which we write note cards to Friends we may not have seen for a time or Friends who are at a distance or have moved away. This method of keeping in touch helps to build community and responses which are shared at Monthly Meeting’s “News of Friends”.

Our third First Day at 9:30 is devoted to Quaker Faith and Practice learning. Topics are drawn from Testimonies and Friends practices, with presentations and conversation on the topics. New Friends and attenders find this time together enriching and also a time of deepening friendships.

On the fourth First Day at 9:30 we turn our attention to issues of social justice. This year we selected books for the group to read (and made available to anyone in the Meeting). These books have provided deeper knowledge and understanding of indigenous people in the U.S. and unhoused people. When discussing these topics we have found that even the “dumbest questions” have led us in new and meaningful directions. We know we do not have all the answers or solutions to today’s problems. We invited people from the community outside of our walls to come speak with us so that we might find ways in which to move forward with our energies and resources.

Our Meetings for Worship follow these first hour interactions and are held in silence with occasional vocal ministry that is heartfelt, spirit-led, and comes from a deep and sincere place in those that share.

After worship each First Day, we enjoy a shared meal. This time spent together nourishes our bodies and souls as we share and listen to each other's life's comings and goings. There is always room at the table.

Having had spiritual awakenings as a result of all the activities we engage in each First Day, we are better able to carry Friends' message of peace, love, understanding and joy to that of God in Everyone we encounter throughout our day.