

# THE SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE YEARLY MEETING

## REPORTED TO ANNUAL SESSION

### 7TH MONTH, 2020

This year's Spiritual State of the Meeting process was well underway when the COVID-19 pandemic struck our communities, forcing us to learn new ways to hold Meetings for Worship in a period of social distancing. Local Meetings initiated their own drafting of their reports at different times; some sent their approved reports to Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM), before the pandemic led to widespread shutdowns, but nonetheless other political and social turmoil dominated the nation; other reports included responses to the situation. Altogether, the reports we received show a resilient and often vibrant Quaker community, in awe of the strength and comfort we receive from each other.

Our communities, large and small, spoke of their Meetings for Worship as an oasis from a difficult period, serving as a resting spot where strength could be gathered for the road ahead and shelter found from the storms. When searching for ways to describe the experience of our Meetings, Friends often use images illustrating nourishment like a watering hole, oasis, or garden that provides nourishment:

*We feel ourselves recharged and able to develop a center of calm that sustains us in our everyday life and helps us face our fears with the courage gained by our commitment to one another.*

*[Our] Meeting is a place to be bathed in voices of love, peace, and kindness, providing comfort and encouragement to us. It is not easy to find a climate where people feel free to share our dark sides. Here we can share openly and honestly in a loving environment.*

*We are glad for the oasis of quiet and spiritual reassurance that Meeting provides us, from which we gain the strength and confidence to move outward into the wider world.*

Future reports will be able to reflect deeply on how the pandemic has changed us and our Meeting. The report this year serves to highlight we were a strong, thriving, and striving group of Meetings as we headed into the storm.

BYM Ministry and Pastoral Care provided a set of queries to help guide Friends communities, at their discretion, to assemble their reports. Not all Meetings found the queries useful for their purposes; others engaged with them. The committee uses the queries here to help organize this report. The first set of queries were

**“How do we nurture healthy vocal ministry? How do we nurture ministries of other kinds and affirm one another’s gifts? How can we improve the way in which we recognize and speak to one another’s gifts?”**

Many Meetings spoke of how the silence has become an ever-important part of their worship.

*Deep silence experienced in Meeting for Worship stimulates Friends' spiritual growth and feels "vibrant and alive."*

One Friend was quoted describing the silence in worship as "the spiritual ground" they stand on.

Friends at two of our larger Meetings have created an early morning First-Day worship as an often more silent substitute for the larger First-Day meeting. In some smaller Meetings, spoken ministry is not heard often.

*Spoken ministry is rare as the silence seems to prevail. In our discussion of this it was clear that messages would be readily received and held in the spirit in which they were given. We can nurture this more by acknowledging messages that speak to us. We also recognize the possible breaking of grace by words and are aware when we should stop speaking.*

Some wonder if they are missing something important.

*We realized that it is more difficult to convey the meaningfulness of the presence of the Spirit in our Meeting and in our lives, particularly since we don't have a lot of vocal ministry.*

Some Meetings spoke of experiencing discord stemming from spoken messages in this turbulent political time. Friends were especially appreciative when a Friend sharing vocal ministry showed that they were vulnerable

*Messages of anxiety and disquiet punctuate the wisdom, hope, joy, and stillness the Spirit brings us in worship and conversation.*

*Good messages can come from vulnerability—when we are authentically vulnerable in ministry—that builds community.*

Friends struggled over what to do with discordant messages:

*Politically we have some diversity in our Meeting. Some friends ask to leave our politics at the door. Others ask if this is a way of avoiding tension by not discussing differing points of view?*

One Friend was quoted as saying Meeting for Worship can never be like a piano tuned for one note. Such a piano would never capture the essence of a Beethoven sonata where diverse notes create a harmony. Many Meetings suggested creative listening as a skill that needed to be nurtured and encouraged a kind and patient approach to hearing messages a given Friend might at first prickle at.

*Sometimes vocal ministry remained challenging during the year, but Friends and Attenders expressed appreciation for the ways in which the Meeting created space for compassionate listening—even in cases of long or repetitive messages.*

*When a spoken message doesn't affect you, it may speak to others. Avoid judging.*

Another Friend felt that a real challenge for vocal ministry is the fear of not being politically correct and finding the courage to go ahead and speak our truth as it is revealed to us: *“The truth that comes out in vocal ministry is what guides us forward.”*

This makes it all the more important to ensure vocal ministry, led by the Spirit and delivered with integrity, is encouraged, regardless of how it might challenge us. Positive feedback was seen as a way to nurture vocal ministry.

*“I feel motivated to respond and others have done that with me,” said one Friend. “It nurtures our willingness. It’s important to acknowledge it if we are touched.”*

*As Friends we are all ministers . . . we need to call one another forth and support one another in living into the gifts that we have.*

A few Meetings are using “Four Doors to Meeting for Worship” by William Taber which describes how to enter the Meeting for Worship as a series of four steps, or doors, as a guide of when to be led to speak. One Meeting experimented with a separate worship sharing on Wednesdays in an effort to better know the spiritual concerns of fellow members and attenders.

Another experimented with a separate Meeting that can be called quickly on any Sunday when Friends feel the need to share at length about a recent geopolitical event.

Meetings concluded that efforts were needed to make other seekers feel at home in the oasis of our meetings for worship:

*We are committed to learning ways to speak our truths that are more effective and further openness among us.*

Meetings spoke about numerous ways their ministry went beyond vocal ministry. Engaging with the wider communities where Meetings are located helped build outreach, support local witness, and germinate stewardship both within Friends and with the community at large. Activities included strawberry or blueberry festivals, providing meals for the homeless and cold in the winter months, supporting local education efforts and families with young children in need, setting up an Earth Cares committee, and vigils at the local post office. Another Meeting began to intentionally build relationships with their African American neighbors, another Meeting tended the community Peace Tree, and others participated in ecumenical activities and fundraisers.

The second set of queries for guiding reporting read

**“What paralyzes us or prevents us from answering our call? What fears do we experience? Which fears drive us and which fears create obstacles?”**

In answering this query some Meetings despaired that their communities are getting smaller over time:

*Our membership is dwindling. Friends are moving away and few others are joining us to take their place. Our membership is also aging and we are concerned about the sustainability of our Monthly Meeting.*

Fortunately, Friends at many Meetings, small and large, are increasing commitments to outreach and finding creative ways to expand the oasis.

*We have hung a new sign, placed announcements in the local paper, and updated our website.*

The trying nature of the world we live in caused one Meeting to say that their biggest fear was a loss of faith in humanity. But this fear eases in meeting for worship.

*Just as “we are afraid of the flame because it burns, fear is not always negative.” It can illuminate our challenges.*

Several Friends found the concept of “concerns” more appropriate than the concept of “fears”:

*[A Friend] suggested that, if we change the query to “Which loves and passions drive us?” it will look very different and inspire us to come from a much better place than fear. Deep leadings often come from love and passion.*

The third set of queries

**“Do we have the courage to create space for our human fallibility and vulnerability? In what do we find that kind of courage?”**

One Meeting spoke of the need for courage to allow our Meetings to change. Once we have found the oasis, are we willing to let it grow naturally?

*I hope we can overcome fears and be bold to let the community know we are here. As I think about attracting young people, and people different from us, I fear we exclude people without knowing it like people of color, young people, people with different political beliefs. Part of that excluding, for me, is a fear of change.*

One Meeting spoke directly about the need to create space for Friends who are more conservative politically.

*One Friend, from a conservative Quaker background, said that although he is comfortable worshipping here, he has trouble fitting into this activist community and doesn't feel needed. Another Friend spoke for many when he responded, “We need you, Friend.” How can we, as a community, grow into more harmony?*

*A powerful opportunity to share our Light was presented to us by [our state] House of Delegates representative, who is a member of [our] Meeting. She invited a small group from the Meeting to give the invocation at the start of a House session.*

In summary, Friends find a deeper call more than ever to seek unity in a world where disunity seems to grow ever prevalent. Our constituent Meetings encounter different challenges in some ways; many smaller Meetings are drawn to dive deeper into outreach while larger, more active Meetings struggle to discern how to deepen worship and make room for a diversity of views and for needs in spiritual development. Some celebrate living in a community driven by the power of welcoming and listening while others call out a need to further grow active listening skills and be open and honest with one another in addressing issues of contention. Throughout, all Friends are striving to be reflective of Courage,

Faith and Hope to Love Across Our Differences—whether they are cognizant of Annual Session’s theme or not.

BYM expresses deep gratitude for the Meetings who sent in their reports, understanding the process can be time-consuming and requires much effort spent reflecting upon the prior year. Spiritual State of the Meeting Reports are not just critical in helping the Yearly Meeting identify local Meetings’ needs, strengths, and desires for improvement, they also help local Meetings both identify new ideas to try and recognize the joys and struggles we have in common. The quotes above are taken from the reports. The reports are included in full in Annual Session materials and in the Yearbook, so we encourage all Friends to seek them out and gain insight from them.