**Friends Meeting of Washington**

**Spiritual State of the Meeting 2016**

**REPORT – June 12, 2016**

**Background**

The idea for a new approach to the Spiritual State of the Meeting (SSOM) survey in 2016 originated in events of 2015. The SSoM report adopted in the spring of that year identified a tension in Friends Meeting of Washington between “long-timers” in the Meeting who had been attending ten years or more, and relative “newcomers” who are often unsure of “how things work and how they can fit in.”

Awareness of this tension was heightened in mid-2015 when incidents of inappropriate behavior and harassment on the part of one Friend came to the attention of the broader Meeting. These incidents, which had been ongoing for some time, were thought to evidence problems in communication and problem-solving between older and young adult Friends. One dimension of this challenge was the fact that, in addition to personal communication, digital and social media had been used as a tool for the troubling behavior.

In response, in their October 2015 annual report, the Committee on Ministry and Worship recommended the creation of a Futures Task Force to identify ways to better bridge the generational gap and make recommendations to carry the Meeting into a future that is more diverse, digital, and dynamic than any Quakers have ever experienced before.

**Process**

Members of Ministry and Worship designed a 15-question closed-ended survey intended to lay the groundwork for a more substantive discussion about the Meeting in the Future. M&W made the survey available to members and attenders of FMW online via Survey Monkey. Hard copies were also available. A total of 91 people responded to the survey – a richer number than in recent previous years.

Once the initial survey results had been tallied, and following the custom of 2015, M&W convened a series of 5 (??) focus groups in order to gain additional perspective from Friends on some of the findings. These focus groups included Friends of all ages and were extremely helpful in expanding our understanding.

One of the most important messages from the focus groups is that Friends would like to have ongoing opportunities to dialogue about issues such as the ones that emerged from the SSoM survey. They feel that regular (monthly, semi-monthly?) opportunities to get together for substantive conversations will be much more beneficial to the Meeting’s spiritual health than a once-a-year survey that is presented, discussed, adopted, and then put on the shelf.

**Summary**

The Friends Meeting of Washington survey and focus groups illuminated a community that is remarkably diverse, but also grounded in a shared understanding of several key principles and testimonies. This draft report presents six themes that illustrate this diversity and commonality.

1. **Integrity and equality are foundational Quaker testimonies.**
2. **Stewardship will be increasingly important in the future.**
3. **We do not expect that Friends will have a great impact in the world of the future.**
4. **Our inspiration comes from many sources – well beyond traditional Quaker works.**
5. **Our spiritual practices focus inward and outward.**
6. **The Society of Friends – and FMW -- face external and internal challenges to growth.**

Preceding each theme in the body of this report is a quotation cited in the survey or focus groups. Following each theme is a query that may be used for further dialogue and illumination.

**Themes**

“There is that of God in everyone.”

*Nine of every ten of us agree.*

**Integrity and equality are foundational Quaker testimonies.**

When asked to weigh each of six Quaker testimonies, more Friends selected “integrity” and “equality” as important than any other. We asked Friends to elaborate in our focus groups. They emphasized that integrity and equality are not necessarily higher in rank than the other testimonies; rather they are foundational. They underpin everything we believe and do. They keep us grounded. One Friend pointed out that we are Seekers of Truth, and integrity is a by-product of living in the Truth.

A majority of those responding to the survey indicated that the Quaker testimony on “simplicity” was less important. And yet, simplicity was cited as being “very difficult to implement” by more of us than any of the other testimonies. It also received the “worst” rating in terms of how the world we live in respects our principles.

Queries:

What does “equality” mean in an interconnected global community with members of so many races, ethnicities, languages, cultural backgrounds, sexualities and gender identities, abilities / disabilities, income levels, ages? What does it mean in the community that is our Meeting?

In this world, have we given up on “simplicity,” or do we need to spend some time as a community redefining it in today’s context? How can we (should we?) let our lives speak?

“The best recreation is to do good.”

*Four of ten of us agree. An equal number say “probably.”*

**Stewardship will be increasingly important in the future.**

More than two-thirds of us indicated on the survey that the Quaker testimony of “stewardship” is not very important. And yet, an equal share of us believe that stewardship will become more important in the future. None of the other testimonies was considered to be increasing in importance by as many of us as was stewardship.

In the focus groups, Friends emphasized that stewardship is important in terms of the environment, but it also means taking care of the Meeting – financially, spiritually, and by nurturing and mentoring others.

Queries: What does “stewardship” mean in today’s world of finite resources (energy, land, clean water, food, money, time, talent, more)? What aspects will become more important in the future? Will we be challenged most directly at the personal, Meeting, community, national, or global level?

“I believe in the light of Love.”

*Three of every four of us agree.*

**We do not expect that Friends will have a great impact in the world of the future.**

The survey asked whether Quakers as a group will have an “important” impact, a “little” impact, or “no” impact on each of testimonies in the next ten years. Across all testimonies, the vast weight of responses was in the “a little” impact category. Friends were most likely to believe that we will have an impact on peace and equality over the next ten years – although this was true for fewer than one-third of us. When asked to assess the future influence of Quakers on all six testimonies, approximately one of seven of us said “I don’t know.”

In the focus groups, Friends pointed out that “largely silent meetings are not always nourishing.” Our Meeting is a place we can go to in order to restore “our connection with our values.” There are people in the Meeting who exemplify these core values; they let their lives speak? “What happened to the FMW of 1968 and radical activism?”

Query: Do our responses to this question indicate a lack of confidence? Lack of inspiration? Too many things on our plates? Or do Quakers choose to let our lives speak through activism in organizations and causes outside the Meeting?

“There is more to spiritual life than complying with the rules and practices of a church.”

*More of us agree with this statement than with any other on the survey.*

**Our inspiration comes from many sources – well beyond traditional Quaker works.**

Friends find spiritual inspiration and nourishment from many different sources. When asked what is “central to our lives,” more of us selected the teachings of Jesus, Mysticism, and Christianity than any other source. The teachings of Jesus were also cited as being “inspirational” to more than half of us – following the source of inspiration selected by an even greater number of Friends: the teachings of Buddha. Other sources of inspiration included Taoism and Judaism.

More than three-quarters of us “mostly disagree” with Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christianity – a more negative rating than was received by any other spiritual resource.

One-third or more of us indicated that we simply do not know much about Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, or the teachings of Moses.

Query: Are these various perspectives in tension in our community? Are there ways we can ensure they enhance our communal spiritual experience?

“I am seeking continuous revelation.”

*Almost seven of every ten of us agree.*

**Our spiritual practices focus inward and outward.**

Friends were asked how we enhance our spiritual lives. The responses were quite diverse and reflected an emphasis on both inward and outward expressions of faith. Half or more of all Friends said that we provide service to others; read philosophy, ethics, or spiritual writings; meditate regularly; meet socially with friends; study social issues; and pray. Fewer Friends participate in activities customary within other denominations, such as studying the Bible, fasting, or seeking to attract others to our faith.

In the focus groups conducted after the survey, examples of faith in action provided by Young Adult Friends were the most animated and wide-ranging. Young Friends illustrated their views with personal examples related to how we work, what we buy, what we eat, what we own, how we live, how we view global and national events, how we tap into talents, how we relate to one another.

Query: Do we foster and nourish an ongoing exchange of spiritual experiences and perspectives between older and younger Friends? Are there things we could do more or better?

“Those who are guided by the light of God are one.”

*Three of every ten of us agree, but four of ten said “No” or “I don’t know.”*

**The Society of Friends – and FMW -- faces external and internal challenges to growth.**

We asked why there are so few Quakers compared to other faith groups, and Friends answered both broadly and specifically. Half or more of us feel that people in general are growing more secular in their thinking, people who enjoy silence are not good at marketing themselves to others, and many people still have a stereotypical image of Quakers.

A significant number of us also referenced two concerns about our own meeting, which have come up repeatedly in previous surveys and discussions. One such issue involves vocal ministry that is jarring and spiritually unsettling – or as one Friend put it, “intempestive” – and that discourages newcomers from ever coming back.

Another issue is that “meetings are so tolerant that they tolerate bad behavior and harassment.” One Friend in a focus group said that “we live in denial, and don’t want to hear about these things.” Another challenged that “we need to equip ourselves better with communication and integrity.”

Query: These challenges have come up in different forms, but repeatedly, in SSoM surveys of recent years. What do we need to do differently to address them, or are we content to live with them as they are?

**Recommendations**

“Opting out is not a neutral choice.”

“We have to make imperfect decisions in an imperfect world.”

*Observations from the Young Adult Friends Focus Group*

We encourage Friends Meeting of Washington to use the results of the SSoM process to stimulate ongoing dialogue about ways in which individual Quakers and our Meeting can let our lives speak in the dynamic future that already surrounds us. Those who participated in our focus groups asked for regular opportunities to get together and discuss the issues that emerged. We believe that this is a very good idea, which will be enriched by the full participation of both long-time members and new-comers, and by those of all ages. Perhaps the queries presented in this report can provide starting points. There are many more, for sure.