

Friends Meeting of Washington
Report on the Spiritual State of the Meeting
Approved by Meeting for Business, April 12, 2015

The Spiritual State of the Meeting report is Ministry and Worship's annual effort to feel the pulse of the Meeting. In 2015, we used a refined version of the familiar short survey that eliminated open-ended questions, provided more detailed demographic information about those responding, and could be answered in ten minutes. Friends must have liked it because participation was considerably higher than in the last two years. In addition, a series of six focus groups encouraged Friends to look together at important questions regarding our spiritual health and well-being and speak to them personally and directly.

Here are a few findings from the survey. They show us what we look like from some slightly unfamiliar angles, and raise some important questions:

- Two-thirds of us have partners and children who are "close to Quaker values but are not Quakers." Is this challenging us to reach out and draw more family members into the FMW community? Are there ways to do this without proselytizing?
- Friends are out and about. In 2014, more than half of us attended a Friends Meeting other than FMW, and almost two-thirds worshiped with a different religious group. We might see this as an opportunity to be examples in the world of who Quakers are and what they do and an opportunity to bring new ideas and perspectives from other religious groups to our Meeting.
- Friends are divided about the nature of Quaker beliefs and the emphasis that God and the Bible should have in our worship. 21 percent of those who took the survey said we should put more emphasis on God, but 11 percent said we should put less. 19 percent said we should emphasize Christianity and the Bible more, but 23 percent said less. Can we create and maintain a vibrant community that balances differing views?
- Four items stood out on the list of things that Friends think deserve more attention from the Meeting: (1) welcoming newcomers, (2) enhancing relationships among Friends, (3) improving the quality of worship, and (4) Simplicity (this ranks above Social Justice, Global Issues, and God as a topic we should do more about). While the first three challenges appeared on previous surveys, the fourth was something of a

surprise. What does “simplicity” mean in the context of the world we live in today, and how can we do more about it?

In addition to these perspectives on who we are and what we consider important, the survey and focus groups revealed a number of polarities or areas of tension, some familiar and some less so. These pose challenges not to be answered one way or the other, but for which the Meeting must strive to find balance, in the context of continuing revelation and loving awareness. There are tensions, for example, between:

- **Small Groups and the Larger Community.** At the moment, FMW rejoices in numerous small groups that allow Friends to pursue their varied spiritual interests. Many consider them a sign of the Meeting's spiritual vitality. Others feel concern that the number and success of these groups could fragment the Meeting and cause us to lose our sense of ourselves as a community. Some even see our worship groups as part of this problem. What if members of a worship group identify primarily with the group rather than with the Meeting community? Is the fact that we do not worship together a problem or is it part of our strength? Do worship groups encourage cliquishness or diversity?
- **Old and New.** This is the predictable tension between longtime Friends who may see themselves as the people who have "carried" the Meeting and more recent members/attenders, who are the bringers of new energy and new ideas. Longtimers, those who have worshiped here for over 10 years, may wonder why the new ones don't hurry to join committees and pick up "their share" of the work. In fact, the newer attenders, the majority of whom may also be new to Quakerism, could be a little uncertain of how things work and how they can fit in. With the Meeting's help, they'll find their footing in Quakerism – and spread their wings.
- **Quiet and Jarring.** Friends of all ages speak very movingly of what the silence means to them. They lament about having it broken by messages that come from "the head and not the heart," by "prepared statements" and "even harsh words." On the other hand, a Friend reminds us that spirit-led messages come in many different forms, not all of them attractive. He notes that one of the few messages last year that was important to him could have been called "extremely disruptive." He says we need to listen and discern.

- **Difficult People and Safe Meetings.** This is an acute form of the previous and a perennial question. How can our Meeting be open to and care for difficult and troubled people at the same time as we try to create a safe place where no one feels threatened or offended by anything that is said? Can efforts like those carried on by Healing and Reconciliation be helpful in reconciling the tension between “open” and “safe”? What responsibility do individual Friends have here?
- **Laboring and Letting Go.** One of the most remarkable differences between focus group discussions with Young Friends and Young Adult Friends and our older participants (who made up more than half the survey respondents) was the emphasis that younger Friends placed on the importance of letting go. YAFs said: “We can share each other’s burdens/crosses, but perhaps we have done as much as we reasonably can in some cases.... We should rely more on God and less on ourselves; we need to remind ourselves often.” Is it possible that we sometimes labor with difficult issues too long? After we have done our best, is it then time to let go and let God?

Friends in the focus groups were aware of how very hard it can be to deal with tensions in the Meeting, but they believed that, when we are faithful to our testimonies and leadings, we can do it. You have to learn, one said, “to be comfortable in uncertainty. This is difficult for our community.” A young Friend observed that we need to seek patience and that of God “in ourselves and others when we disagree.” Another added that we should be “gentler with others in conflict.” Finally, a member of the group that has been working with conflicts connected with the Child Safety and Welcoming policy said that all those involved could see Spirit working in the process.

Ministry and Worship believes that these voices sum up the Meeting’s challenges and its strengths and tell us much of what we need to know about its state of health. But the last word surely belongs to our youngest speaker, a First Day School student. When asked what he would like to tell us for the report, he said “the Meeting’s okay.” We hope you all agree.

Respectfully submitted by the Committee on Ministry and Worship: Bertie Rossert, Debby Churchman, Gene Throwe, Greg Robb, Hayden Wetzal, Marcia Reecer, Marsha Holliday, Michael Huffington, Blair Forlaw (clerk).

Addendum: Looking to our Future

Words We Most Often Heard in Focus Groups with Teens and Young Adult Friends

