
SPIRITUAL STATE OF BALTIMORE YEARLY MEETING

Throughout the Yearly Meeting Friends are grappling with the question of what being a Quaker in the 21st century involves and how they can be bearers of the Quaker light amidst the menacing pockets of violence and injustice in our world. As Friends face myriad crises in our society, the Meeting communities become critical lifelines of the Spirit, offering solace, support, and encouragement.

Monthly Meetings are being powerfully affected by the events of the world, particularly those surrounding the Peace Testimony. Nearly every meeting described seeking solutions to the trouble, sorrow and fear that have grown in our communities and around the world with the increase of terrorism by hate groups and governments alike. Several meetings have reached out to local Muslim communities to build understanding; some are documenting the participation and conscientious objector status requests of their youth; and most have reached out to the needy of the world in an effort to reduce the causes of war, what one described as the “despair that feeds terrorism.” Vigils, marches and letter writing campaigns for peace and the careful crafting of Monthly Meeting peace statements are widespread throughout the Yearly Meeting.

One of the side effects of this focus on responses to terrorism has been an increased awareness of the diversity within our communities and, especially, within our meetings. The times have also attracted more attenders without Quaker backgrounds, leading to a struggle between “protecting our spiritual base” and welcoming all ministry, particularly in large urban meetings. Meetings have expressed a need to be more faithful in our listening and more caring in our response; to listen lovingly, non-judgmentally, deeply and prayerfully; to be more direct, appreciative of differences and to treat one another with kindness and respect, forbearing the appearance of preaching to those with whom we disagree. However, as in all things, this struggle has been a blessing as well; many meetings have found ways to celebrate diversity, and individuals have found increased richness in their relationships with others through the struggle. One meeting quoted Thomas Kelly’s *The Eternal Promise*, “Love of God and love of neighbor are not two commandments, but one.”

Many Monthly Meetings recorded being challenged to find a more spiritual basis in their Meetings for Business. Several small meetings mentioned a struggle to balance temporal and spiritual needs. Meetings spoke of individuals speaking in haste, and leaving too little time for reflection after messages, which have led to

discord. Other than the peace testimony, property acquisition issues also especially challenged the Spirit-led Quaker process of several meetings. Concerns were expressed over the “same relatively small group in attendance,” and the struggle to balance delegating responsibilities to committees versus bringing issues to the Monthly Meeting as a whole. One clerk offers a “Clerk’s Planning Meeting” before each business session to develop an agenda and discuss the art of clerking, a practice that has resulted in more seasoned material coming to the Monthly Meeting. A few meetings noted that attendance at their meetings for business has grown, even tripled in one case, and that meetings are held in a spirit of trust, a joyful atmosphere, and a feeling that all voices are heard; dissent, when expressed thoughtfully and respectfully, can lead to better communication and understanding.

Several meetings raised the concern of pastoral care. Hunger for spiritual community and longing for fellowship were evident in many Meetings. One said that the test of community is whether F(f)riends are comfortable seeking help or assistance. Meeting communities question the limits of being “lovingly nosy,” knowing the difference between “gossip” and spreading the word that community members may need help; they note that asking and being asked for help are both unique faith opportunities. A number of Meetings have weekly or monthly discussions and fellowship groups, Friendly 8s and Spiritual Formation groups, and over half mentioned having a “Quakerism 101” and/or “State of the Meeting” discussion series as well. All of these help foster the closeness that eases the way to asking and giving help. A helpful caution; one Meeting noted that, “as the Pastoral Care Committee seeks to nurture the spiritual well-being of those at our Meeting, we may overlook the spiritual process of our own committee.” As one way to improve communication, Meetings are making more use of the world wide web, thus saving mailing and printing costs.

Religious education is alive and well in most Meetings, although a few have no children at present. Those who do generally noted that the children bring vitality and joy to the community and are involved in many outreach projects that help the Meeting reach out to the wider community. A common concern, especially for Meetings with many children, is the difficulty of finding enough teachers for First Day School. One Meeting has solved this by instituting a rotating assignment of teaching duties to Meeting members, providing them with materials and lesson plans. Several Meetings mentioned the enthusiastic BYM campers who enrich their youth programs.

As always, the meeting for worship remains at the heart of our communities. Overall, Meetings find that periods of worship provide the feeling of a loving community. A continuing issue of common concern is handling, gently but effectively, latecomers and other distractions, and those who speak too often, too long, or inappropriately. The influx of newcomers and the loss this year of several “weighty” Friends have exacerbated these issues. One urban Meeting has a “head of meeting” who rises at the beginning of worship and gives information about Quaker worship and vocal ministry. They noted that this ‘introduction’ affects the nature of the worship and that messages may be fewer and more Spirit-led. In spite of these concerns, meetings for worship are described as “blessed with the Spirit of Love”; “a spiritual home and sanctuary from the world”; “paramount to the life of the Meeting”; “bring[ing] solace and strength”; and some Meetings mentioned that their worship had been deepened by a shared concern for the state of the world. As one Meeting put it, “our corporate ‘waiting expectantly upon the Lord’ is the essence...all the rest, the testimonies, etc., are the fruits of this practice.”

Just as our Monthly Meetings have struggled with issues in 2002, the Yearly Meeting has struggled as a body. Our Clerk, Lamar Matthew, was treated in a hurtful way at the FUM Triennial in Kenya, and the Yearly Meeting has labored with how to maintain a healthy relationship with FUM. Some committees have had difficulty finding enough members or getting enough Meeting attenders at times, and property issues have created a need to bring together differing perspectives.

At the same time, the Spiritual Formation Program is flourishing; Religious Education is reemerging after a period of inactivity, and the Peace Committee has been very busy. The Camping Program continues to flourish and foster spiritual growth and physical strength in adults and campers alike. Overall, Baltimore Yearly Meeting is active and alive in the work of the Spirit.