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## SPIRITUAL STATE OF BALTIMORE YEARLY MEETING

If life is defined by challenges and joys, Baltimore Yearly Meeting is fully alive. On both the monthly and yearly meeting levels, communities are strengthened through the challenges being met. In terms of growth in membership, BYM added eighty-seven members in 2003—the equivalent of an additional meeting. Twenty of the Yearly Meeting’s forty Meetings had fewer than 62 members—ten with twenty-seven or fewer members; twenty were larger, five with more than three hundred members. Since the two Yearly Meetings consolidated in 1968, BYM has grown by more than twelve hundred members.

The Spiritual State of the Monthly Meeting Reports note many common issues, with some quoted here for emphasis. A number of Meetings reflect the state of world affairs—an acknowledgment of the impact that the outer world has on our communities: “In a time of confusion and war, stress and conflict test our endurance, faith, and the peace within our souls and our Meeting.” “Given the present world environment, we are especially aware of any discord that may arise in Meeting as a result of members and attenders being in various places in their discernment of the peace testimony and of the need to seek accord and understanding among ourselves.” “Events around the world and in our own country have placed heavy burdens on our collective conscience.” “Our work in the public eye has made some in our Meeting proud of our leadership and activism. Other Friends, however, wonder if our corporate activism has put personal urgencies before the leading of the Spirit.” “We wish to find ways publicly to celebrate our heritage of tolerance and non-violence without alienating or appearing to preach to our reasonable brothers and sisters, with whom we disagree on some points of vital importance to us all.” We are meeting these stresses within our Meetings, within our Yearly Meeting, and with the larger community in various ways, including a retreat on the theme, “Finding Inner Peace in Times of Turmoil.”

The most common report is, as always, the richness and centrality of the Meeting for Worship. “Those who participate regularly in Meeting for Worship...find that their lives change as a result.” “...with Meeting for Worship at the center of our life together, we proceed in faith.” Meetings find additional enrichment in sharing at the rise of Meeting. One meeting “has begun sharing joys, sorrows and concerns at the rise of Meeting and we find that this practice brings our large group together and makes us aware of individuals’ needs.”

However, it is also true that “our Meetings for Worship would be greatly enriched by a community-wide commitment to the Quaker tradition of expectant waiting for divine guidance, from a better knowledge of Quaker practice, and more reflection from everyone as to whether their messages are Spirit-led”. To

address this in one meeting, "...a Friendly Forum was held to address Friends' experiences with the 'calling' to speak. This discussion was well attended, offered an opportunity to share our spiritual understandings with each other, and seems to have helped with a sense of balance in our worship together." The long-standing problem was noted of "...how the first 20 minutes of a sacred worship is interrupted by a flow of latecomers and sundry commotion."

Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business remains a challenge to many Meetings: "Not everyone understands that Meeting for Worship for the conduct of Business is an expression of commitment to the life of the Meeting and an opportunity to participate in a vital and challenging form of worship." "Sometimes we forget that it should not be the Meeting making these decisions, but Divine guidance." "We need to remind ourselves that Quaker process is not only a precious practical instrument but also an invaluable spiritual instrument in itself." "Friends have appreciated the Clerk's ability to enable Friends to focus on the worshipful aspects of the business meeting and to be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit."

Many Meetings mentioned a challenge with pastoral care. "We have learned that inquiries can be sensitive or hurtful for inactive members. We are struggling to find a way with grace and love to make contact that will be more caring." In one meeting, "A Committee continues to wrestle with how to best provide pastoral care to a meeting as large and diverse as our meeting is. We are aware of a considerable need for visitation, and other forms of outreach." Another notes that, "the pace of the past two years has been challenging, but as a result of initiatives and outreach efforts, friends are now more thoughtful and mindful of how disparate activities fit into the overall purpose of pastoral care." The painful loss of many members of our communities was felt. "During 2003 we lost two cherished members of our Meeting, and the strength of the community was palpable as we worked together to strengthen those members and their families during their last days."

Most Meetings mention a number of ways in which they build a strong community. "Each First Day our Meeting for Worship is extended and filled with fellowship in the Spirit by a shared meal." "A discussion group on First Day has been a blessing for members and attenders who find it a safe place to speak freely about issues." "A monthly newsletter, monthly potlucks and programs offered by our Spiritual Nurture committee help facilitate a vital sense of community."

However, several Meetings also mentioned discord and conflict in their communities. "As one member stated, we are great at going out to tell others how to resolve conflicts, yet we are not very good at it in our personal relationships." At the same time, we note that "Any splintering or fraction of our Meeting holds a part of the Truth, and we seek to honor discernment and understand each other

as well as issues.” Within our Quaker community alone there are plenty of seeds for discord. As one meeting asks, “How does a faith that began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with ‘Christ Jesus has come to teach the people himself,’ formed by a profound but surely heretical reading of the Christian scriptures, speak of Christ Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?”

“Providing a First Day School program has been an on-going challenge because of a diversity of ages, varied attendance patterns, and organizational challenges.” However, for some, “First Day School continues to grow and thrive... Attendance is consistent in some of the classes, which has allowed for a sense of community to develop, and longer term projects to emerge.”

The BYM programs for youth are also acclaimed. “The BYM Camping Program continues to play an important role in the spiritual life of our children, and one elder notes that the influence on the wider culture, while subtle, is evident.” “Most parents report how “Quaker” [the] youth seem to be, and they credit the dedication of the Religious Education committee, as well as the BYM programs and the camping program with helping parents raise Quaker kids.” “The Young Friends of the Yearly Meeting stayed with us for a weekend in April and gave us the gift of their vitality, youth and moving sincerity, while we gave them respectful, loving hospitality.”

The need for responsibility of members was observed. “We are continuously challenged to discern how to convey to members the responsibilities of membership.” “We could strengthen and make more visible our communal foundation by communicating specifically what membership entails.” One area of this concern was financial. “...only a small number of our members provide over three-fourths of financial support of the Meeting.” However, after much work, “Friends now seem willing to undertake the important work of discerning how finances and spirituality are connected. We are asking ourselves, “How do I want [the Meeting] to serve its members and its world, and what am I prepared to give to support that?”” In addition, “The tension between internal stewardship and external calls to action continues to ripple within our Meeting.”

Baltimore Yearly Meeting has been struggling with the issue of potentially dangerous individuals in our gatherings and communities. In response to recent occurrences, the Ministry & Pastoral Care Committee has been working on a new policy statement for BYM on dealing with registered sex offenders at our gatherings, and on guidelines for Monthly Meetings to deal with these individuals as communities. One meeting that has had to deal with this noted, “We pray that as we move forward into the next year, we will find that we have made an opportunity out of danger, and that we will continue to grow in the life of the spirit.” This speaks to the ongoing challenge of balancing the special needs of some individuals with those of the community as a whole.

BYM continues in communication with Friends United Meeting staff and General Board about a policy of FUM that discriminates against anyone who cannot sign and enforce a policy that prevents those in sexual relationships outside of marriage between one man and one woman from holding staff and leadership positions in FUM. This has been very painful for many within both BYM and FUM, especially our Friends who are not heterosexual. We continue to examine our consciences and seek discernment of God's Will for us on this matter.

Overall, "we remain steadfast in our commitment to Quaker process, trusting that, when our process seems to fail us, something more and different yet needs to occur within us, so Way opens. Our practice and faith call us to honor, not our agendas, but God's will." And through our challenges, "we have again connected with a spiritual bond which led us back to the real reasons we want to be part of the Meeting. It has renewed our hope for the future, our love of each other and strength to abide."

*Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee*