

THE SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE MEETING REPORT
BALTIMORE YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS
REPORTED TO ANNUAL SESSION AT HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA
3, 8TH MONTH, 2005

The spiritual state of Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends largely depends on the spiritual conditions of the Monthly Meetings. Their vitality of spirit is the reflection of the energy, right relationships and the spiritual well being of their individual members.

Communications among the monthly meetings is good. The dedicated Yearly Meeting staff is constantly at work, keeping information flowing. Hand written epistles delivered by post and intervisitation of Friends traveling in love and concern have nearly been replaced by lightning fast electronic messaging. We keep in mind that the new forms of communication can never replace the spiritual experience of Friends meeting face to face to share how truth prospers among them.

Baltimore Yearly Meeting is growing! Friends are investing significant energy into Agrowing their meetings@ through outreach that includes interpreting Quakerism and the Meeting to the greater community, corporate witness, and in general, letting our lives preach. Many meetings report significant numbers of newcomers. Even younger people are finding us. With the influx of seekers, meetings recognize the need for immediate and sustained welcoming of newcomers and their responsibility to encourage, mentor, and provide education in Friends' faith and practices. While growth has many pleasing dimensions, space issues face many Meetings. Some are considering additions to their buildings, some are renovating, and some are considering acquiring meetinghouses for the first time. In these matters there is always potential for growth as well as for conflict. Way will open if we strive to stay grounded in Truth and centered in the Spirit.

At the same time that Friends are joyful with the presence of so many new faces at meeting, we are saddened by the loss of seasoned Friends, some who have passed on, and others who have moved away. There are yet others who, due to the realities of aging, have decreased their participation. All of these Friends have sustained and guided our meetings. Their presence is felt and they are deeply missed.

The heart of each Meeting within the Yearly Meeting is Meeting for Worship. Together each week, Friends feel the presence of the Spirit and recognize more fully God's presence over and within us all. The stillness ministers to us and we find comfort. We trust that we can know more of God's will collectively than we can individually. In worship we listen to the calling of the Spirit that leads us to service. It is this same source that nourishes and strengthens us individually and corporately so that we may live more fully in the world.

Some Meetings struggle with various aspects of collective worship. Vocal ministry is blossoming in Meetings and Friends are challenged at times to address the diversity of messages offered in worship. There is need for a more clearly shared understanding of Friends traditions and practices. There is also an ongoing need for Friends, new and seasoned, to understand the character, qualities and spiritual nature of vocal ministry. Here, seasoned Friends can provide spiritual guidance and support. Careful reflection on the words that are brought forth, and their effect on the listener, fosters rich and loving vocal ministry. Friends have found vocal ministry most appreciated when it is clearly spirit driven, distinctly audible, and followed by ample space for contemplation. Acceptance of and respect for the spiritual searching of others brings harmony and

understanding to our worshipping communities. Spiritual investment in our Meetings engenders feelings of connection, belonging and love.

Baltimore Yearly Meeting reflects the diverse spiritual understandings and broad range of theological beliefs that are present in the whole of the Society of Friends. A few Friends ask, "Are we neglecting the Christian roots and heritage of Quakerism?" At least one Meeting recognizes that the source of Life, the Creative Force, was embodied in Jesus, as it is in each of us. Some express concern that our Quaker testimonies are being secularized and that a general lack of biblical knowledge distances us from many of our Quaker brothers and sisters. Not all meetings share this concern.

For many Friends, Meeting is central to their daily lives. Meetings are blessed with Friends who are deeply involved in the work and life of our faith. Each of us brings different talents and abilities for service to the Meeting community. Friends contribute to the life of the Meeting through committee work and other roles of responsibility. The entire Meeting benefits from each Friend's spiritual gifts and commitment. We have heard too often that Meeting and Friends' events and activities are not of utmost priority to some members. Attention to family and work responsibilities and social occasions has created busy lives and overfilled schedules. Nominating committees in many Meetings have great difficulty finding people to serve. Some Friends just want to attend worship with no other involvement. Decreased participation in the life of the Meeting brings decreased financial support. Some meetings find it challenging to meet fiscal obligations. The generous giving of a few carries many. Good stewardship directly affects the quality of community life, and so we are called to re-examine our individual commitments to Meeting in the face of our own expanded responsibilities and priorities.

Faithful attendance at Meetings for Worship and Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business are essential to the well being of each Friends community. There is a recognized need to help Friends and attenders learn, understand and practice good Quaker process. *The Faith and Practice of Baltimore Yearly Meeting* is seen as a valued resource to educate new and not so new members in the ways of worship and conduct of business. Some Meetings find that reading and responding to queries from *Faith and Practice* add spiritual richness to Monthly Meeting. With a desire to get things done and an eye to the hour, Friends sometime let the ways of the world creep into business meetings, forgetting that all things are accomplished in God's time. We work hard to build trust with each other through transparency, plainness and honesty. Light frequently illuminates Friends' decision-making, and love leads Friends to try harder to understand one another. However, there are times when we fall short of being willing to labor lovingly together. Acknowledging these difficulties, we earnestly look beyond ourselves and pressing issues to what might be God's will, while continually striving to maintain love and unity amongst ourselves. Disagreement fades, discernment rises and Friends rejoice in discovering way forward.

Opportunities to deepen our knowledge and love for one another abound. A wide variety of activities serve to build and strengthen our Meetings. Quaker communities participate in national protests and local pro-peace activities. Many Meetings engage in activities with other faith communities. Within some meetings, Bible study, retreats, Quaker studies programs, reading groups and various formats for sharing individual spiritual journeys greatly enrich both individual and corporate spiritual life. Vibrant First Day School programs are essential to the life of most Meetings. Religious Education nurtures and supports our children and teenagers, who bring great joy and vitality to our communities. Young Friends impress us with their strength and

independent good works. Adult Religious Education programs also offer opportunities for growth of our spiritual lives. Many meetings search for ways to staff and support First Day School without overstressing dedicated teachers. Simple meals after worship, potlucks or any occasion when the ministry of food is offered provide opportunities for Friends to deepen relationships and to get to know each other better.

Friends follow the Spirit's leadings that call them to be creative instruments for the care and building of their immediate community and the wider world. Friends sometime find it difficult to prioritize and embrace the many issues that are of critical importance. Many individuals carry the weight of a variety of social concerns that are not, at this time, supported by their Meeting. Meetings are aware they need to accept and respect these leadings and ministries and question how they might connect with and encourage these individuals' ministries.

The life of many Meetings has been quickened by contact and participation with the wider Quaker community and larger Quaker bodies. Some meetings recognize the importance of attending Quarterly and Yearly Meetings and maintaining association with Friends organizations. Through these connections, we can experience and value the diversity of views among us and gain new insight and understanding of our faith, traditions, processes and practices.

Friends are called, individually and collectively to strive to make a difference—to make our world a better place. Throughout the past year we have attended to some concerns that troubled us. We are working toward standards that will assure the safety and well-being of our children. The prevention of sexual abuse of our children and youth is a priority.

We have looked at racism among Friends and in our meetings. The focus on racism has allowed us to look at this and other aspects and areas of diversity and discrimination that need our attention. We search for ways to attract and reach out to minorities and to younger than middle-aged people, ways in which we can develop and encourage more diverse communities.

We have given much prayer, meditation and time to discerning our relationship and future association with Friends United Meeting. We find objectionable the personnel policy that discriminates against and limits the participation of people who are in relationships outside the traditional bonds of marriage, and of those who support them. This stricture effectively disallows our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters participation in leadership roles. As a Yearly Meeting, we are clear that our experience has been that spiritual gifts are not distributed with regard to sexual orientation or gender identity. We are hopeful that loving and spirit-filled inter-visitations with members of our fellow FUM yearly meetings, who struggle for understanding, will encourage and assist us all on our journeys.

Our joys, our grief, our ease and our discomfort are all gifts bestowed by the Spirit; some gifts have brought us together, some have pulled us apart; they have all brought us wisdom and maturity. We have grown from our experiences and encounters with the Divine. We are aware of the great resources at our disposal, that when applied in worship, indeed can change the world. We renew our commitment to enact our Quaker values that have the capacity to bring all of creation into harmony.

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