**Baltimore Yearly Meeting**

**Spiritual State of the Yearly Meeting**

**for 2024 presented at the 2025 Annual Sessions.**

BYM Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee invited each local Meeting and BYM committee to reflect on the spiritual condition of their Meeting during 2024. We suggested 4 queries to help in the reporting.

1. *How does the Spirit prosper among you?*
2. *In what ways are we tenderly eldering and educating adults and children in the manner of Friends to deepen our vocal ministry?*
3. *How do we maintain the spirit of openness and humility as we proclaim our testimonies and live them?*
4. *As we work for peace, are we nourished by peace and justice within and among ourselves?*

*[An addendum was included asking Meetings to describe specific ways that Meetings work to become an anti-racist and justice-seeking community. ]*

**Friends through their monthly Meetings reported the Spirit moving through them in worship, in community and in friendship, nourishing, strengthening and guiding them through a tumultuous year. This is what we heard.**

“We are strong. We live in hope. We remain open to the Light. “(Gunpowder Friends Meeting.)

There is a sense that Meeting communities are centered and grounded in worship. “Meetings for Worship nurture us both in profound silence and in moving messages.” “We experience in worship being embraced by Friends with open arms. A sense all humans yearn for, a sense of belonging.”

Meetings large and small experience spiritual growth and renewal, nourishment and comfort in coming together in worship.

For many Meetings, the life of the meeting has grown in vitality as they joyfully foster connecting with one another. Joyous moments abound as Friends sing together, work together, pray together, and tend to their Meetings’ gardens and grounds. A good number of Meetings have reported an increase in new attenders. This has created a joyous challenge of integrating them into the community, as well as benefiting from and being transformed by the new energy and ideas. At the same time, Meetings worked to maintain the character of the community that has developed from the wisdom of many decades of “Being a Friend.” Meetings have strived to …”create a warm inclusive environment where diverse theological perspectives are met with deep nonjudgmental listening and curiosity.” Two of the larger Meetings meet to worship 5 different times a week to meet the needs of all their members and attenders. Many Meetings spend time after worship in sharing their individual spiritual journeys and work to “view each person as a minister unto one another.” Through various means like bible study, book clubs and “Quaker 101 sessions”, weekly Worship Sharing on Quaker Faith and Practice and diverse spiritual texts, and focus groups for collective visioning, Friends come to know each other in that which is eternal. “The Meeting reflects a community committed to spiritual authenticity, mutual support, and an ongoing transformation through Love, Listening and Light.”

A good many Meetings work with Technology to have “hybrid” and or “on-line” worship.”Our Meeting has come to call Zoom ‘the bridge’.” “Recent grappling with the challenges of technology-assisted hybrid worship has been painful for some. After trying some early morning or outdoor evening technology-free worship we eventually came to choose to keep ‘the bridge’ which allows 10 to 15 members to join for whom being in person is not an option. Several Friends have chosen to worship elsewhere. We feel their absence.” “Technology: especially Zoom, has enhanced connection with the broader community, particularly with BYM. Members shared experiences from Yearly Meeting (annual) sessions and participated in regional and national Quaker activities.

Some Meetings report they continue to face the challenge of shrinking numbers and aging members and a few find themselves needing assistance in maintaining their historical Meeting properties. Two small Meetings have joined together for worship and community while struggling to maintain two individual structures. Discerning use of limited finances has been a struggle for many.

Several Meetings have been dealing with tensions and conflict amongst members. While regularly hearing expressions of gratitude of how our Meetings hold and shape us, there has also been a growing awareness that the community needs to be intentional in finding and practicing better ways to deal with hurt and with conflict in the Meeting. “We need a clearness committee for the whole Meeting. How do we support each other more effectively and how do we repair things?”

“Caring Friends have been at times in conflict, particularly over financial matters, and have sought guidance and help from the Friends Supporting Friends BYM working group to address unresolved conflict. “Paradoxically our losses and discomfort over post-Covid changes has deepened our understanding of just how much we cherish this beloved community and this Light within and among us.”

“There has been a loving, open and humble exchange at Meeting: The conflict re Israel-Gaza was very hurtful and problematic for Friends with a Jewish background, but it got better because an injured party spoke up, very clearly, to the whole Meeting. That speaking up was essential. We try to support one another as much as possible, but we need to know when something has hurt someone.” Some Friends have struggled to remain centered in the Spirit while conducting Meeting For Business.

Some Meetings have struggled with the concept and process of Eldering. Some Friends have concerns of not repeating the errors of how Eldering was done in the past being “used as a tool of social control within Quakerism.” “A Meeting culture that is open to lovingly correcting each other is important to our spiritual development.” Is Eldering the process of “taking someone to task” or is Eldering an act of spiritual accompaniment that includes recognizing gifts and challenges?

While Meetings have been experiencing an increase in younger adult attenders and are seeking a shift in generational leadership, there is still an overall decrease in the number of children in our communities. “We feel a loss …of having… families with children.” One Meeting expressed gratitude for being able to hire a new First Day School Coordinator. Another welcomed families to Meeting by setting up a children’s corner in their Meeting room and held 4 family centered worship meetings throughout the year. “Having the little children arrive in my corner and look at me and interact greatly nourishes me.” “I love the children reporting their First Day School experience. It is to the credit …to meeting... that we are recognizing the children's skills and that they are responding to Spirit and we are recognizing that. This is new for us. They will just go up to the mic without adult encouragement and this is great. Our children’s Lights are shining!”

“Friends see Meeting as a spiritual anchor in a changing world, offering stability amid political upheaval, aging and illness.” The year has been marked by both spiritual abundance and the challenges of limited energy in deeply engaged, caring communities. “The community feels both blessed and stretched striving to act faithfully while also confronting the reality of overextension.” The tension between acting on leadings and sustaining personal energy has been a recurring theme, prompting reflection on balance, discernment, and enough-ness.”

Meetings experience and respond to many external pressures. “National injustices challenge the Meeting to live out its peace testimony.” Meetings had convened Meetings for Spiritual Discernment and Listening to address/respond to the challenges of our nation and the world. “We remain committed to modeling Quaker values and speaking truth in Love, striving to lead by example and maintain spiritual focus amid uncertainty.” Participation in groups of peace and justice or climate justice help Friends feel empowered. Many Meetings remain actively engaged in work supporting LGBTQ+ rights, climate justice, homelessness relief, and refugee support. Meetings have held learning gatherings on reparations and anti-racism. Meetings have developed inter-faith collaborations in social justice work. Meetings continue to strive to engage in anti-racist practices and address structural racism. (See reports from BYM working groups.) Meetings have supported their Members with their social justice work with local and national organizations including, Braver Angels, Black Lives Matter, Alternatives to Violence Project, FCNL and AFSC.

Despite political tensions, Friends have been able to emphasize the practices of humility, peaceful dialogue and moral courage.

**Through out the yearly Meetings, Friends have reported feeling overwhelmingly enriched by the Spirit that draws us together. Through worship and a variety of nourishing community activities Friends have met challenges, worked on problems and built and maintained connections with the Divine and each other. “There is a resilience to our community that isn’t often recognized, but is abiding and spirit-led.** “The Meeting is working to ‘be peace’ through finding places of peace in themselves and letting that ‘ripple outward.’” Throughout the year Friends celebrated births and marriages, and celebrated lives in memorial services. “Underlying all is a resilient Spirit-led community that seeks to move forward, grounded in Love, clarity and sense of collective purpose.”