

State of Society Report for 2018

New England Yearly Meeting reminds us, as we ponder the spiritual state of our society of a query from early Friends: *How does Truth prosper among you?*

Yet it is hard to know how to describe the state of our society when the meeting is facing many enormous challenges and changes. Over and over we hear that worship at Friends Meeting at Cambridge (FMC) is central and powerful, but the meeting is challenged with the awareness of our white power structures that are a barrier to welcoming people to our community. Many members live at a distance from this university-town meeting, so with seemingly less free time to gather at our meeting facility many of us don't have regular contact outside meeting activities. The financial contributions do not balance the expenditures that seem to vitalize and offer a physical home for the community. A smaller pool of Friends, often those who are retired, do the bulk of the committee work in a world that seems ever busier. Many members of the community who are in the midst of parenting and work lives find it difficult to make commitments to the meeting. All this results in fewer people eager to take on leadership and committee work, inadequate financial support, and reluctance to join the meeting.

Perhaps our Truth is that being in the midst of momentous change, both within FMC and in the world around us, challenges the practices and processes that have been integral to the community. Openness to transformation of the Spirit is central (we need to transform to be true to the Spirit and our life together), and this comes with pain as well as hope and joy. Friends need to discern what of the past is worth holding onto and what must be let go to be the blessed community we want to be.

The Truth is also evident in the joy and energy of FMC's community life. For those who are active and participate in multiple ways, FMC is a place where "everyone knows your name." Realizing this is not true for many of us is a challenge. We have heard from Friends newer to our meeting or to Quakerism that FMC can be a hard place to feel known. How can the meeting be more welcoming and encouraging to newcomers?

This year the meeting completed a five-year Beneficial Cycle to bring more vitality to the meeting. As that multi-pronged experiment concludes, there is gratitude for the insights we gained as we move forward. Many feel an excitement about working together to share energy and life with each other and the troubled world around us.

The final report from the **Beneficial Cycle** quoted comments of "worship being grounded and gathered more often," the community being "more organized," and "Simple lunches and Afterthoughts connecting us more deeply." Afterthoughts is a half-hour gathering led by someone from Ministry and Counsel as a time to reflect on the worship experience. Newcomers are especially invited, but there are always longer-time Friends who appreciate the smaller group to delve into our spiritual experience together. Refreshments also follow morning worship. Then there is a flurry of activity to set up buffet tables to hold the Simple Lunch prepared by a stalwart crew of volunteers: salad, vegan soup, hummus and bread. (A contribution of up to \$5 is invited, but not required.) More tables and chairs fill the Friends Room and are quickly filled with shared fellowship. It is an opportunity to speak with those we may not know well—an important time in such a big meeting. New attenders can feel shut out so this is one way we can invite them into community.

Adult Education nurtures our spiritual life. Forums precede worship most First Days and draw around 30-40 people. Topics range from justice issues, to spiritual journeys, to wider Friends' concerns. A series on the book, "Our Life is Love" has been a welcome exploration of early and contemporary Friends' experience with Quaker practices and insights. Women's Silent

Retreats twice a year provide time for deep spiritual reflection, and all-meeting retreats are well attended and meaningful.

FMC has a large staff, unlike most meetings, that afford us many benefits such as increased communication and coordination across the many and varied committees, groups, and activities in our meeting. Their professional skill and thoughtful attention allow the rest of the community to focus on spiritual nurture of each other, personal connection, and the more fun and rewarding parts of community participation and “work” while much of the nitty-gritty is taken care of by staff. Less slips through the cracks and community life flows more smoothly. A part time Young Adult Friends (YAF) coordinator supports YAF activities including monthly potlucks. A new “Jesus Group Bible Study” has started among them.

The Youth Minister and Education Coordinator was hired to address FMC’s concern for children and families. First Day School (FDS) attendance has been more consistent lately similar or greater attendance than last year. Still, there is the challenge of the larger societal drift toward secularization and the very busy lives of working parents. A redesign of the nursery space has made it more welcoming. So many little ones have recently been coming that more help was needed to accommodate them—a joyful thing. Providing childcare at events like Business Meeting is important for inclusion of parents and families. The meeting delighted in hearing stories from the seniors graduating high school. Engaging Family Worship once a month explores a theme using story, music, movement, art, and quiet reflection. Organized by a few Friends, like many activities, more help would be appreciated. Might there be ways to support young people organizing around issues like gun control and climate change?

Our facility near Harvard University is a valuable resource allowing the meeting to host both meeting activities and outside groups that are in alignment with our values. A material aid program, formerly part of American Friends Service Committee and now a separate non-profit, is housed in our basement as a ministry to those needing clothing and supplies. We host AA meetings, drumming, activities held by Mennonite and Bahai congregations, yoga, concerts, former prisoner support groups, weddings, memorials, elections, music lessons, public talks on religion, peace and social justice, and more. There is room for our FDS, committee meetings, communal meals, dances, a library, and a guest room. With a staff we can welcome inquirers in a city that is a destination for students, tourists, researchers, and seekers.

There are longtime members who wrestle with the burdens of our buildings and their location. Some would have us free ourselves of real estate and perhaps move to a more diverse location, so there is a tension around our location.

The benefits and opportunities our staff and facilities provide also demand work and money to maintain. Despite the relative privilege and wealth among many of our members, the generation that has mostly now passed from our benches was known to offer large bequests and generous gifts to make up budget shortfalls. That is no longer an option to meet the meeting’s needs. Threshing sessions explore how to increase income and/or decrease expenses without sacrificing the vitality increased spending seems to have brought FMC or our outreaches to the community. Friends have work to do to resolve this dilemma.

FMC is examining whether **membership** must be required on some committees that previously demanded it. Will opening up these committees provide the meeting with voices and energy that might otherwise be lost? What does it mean to be a Quaker? What does being a member mean? What does God require of us? Friends may be afraid of what changes will mean, but are trying to be faithful.

Many involved Friends are aware that **worship** is the only perspective for many in our community. Worshipers bring a range of beliefs and backgrounds in different faith traditions or no faith tradition. The diversity is a joy and challenge. The depth of worship, which remains

central to our experience, moves many members and attenders. But many at worship are not involved in grappling with the changes long-term members and attenders feel. Worship strengthens our community and gives us courage to continue our seeking. Deep, centered vocal ministry feeds our spirits. Vocal ministry can also have hurtful impact when it shows signs of racism or other bias, or raises up painful memories.

There is a lot of work being done to increase **awareness of racial bias, oppressive actions, and LGBTQ+ prejudices**. Friends For Racial Justice holds regular gatherings and workshops, a White Privilege Book Group meets together to build stamina for discomfort and share in the work of transformation. The LGBTQ+ Working Group offers education and support. New signage displays our desire to be a welcoming, safe place for all who seek us out.

Individuals and groups are **active in the world** by bringing Friends' peace activism to protests-- bearing witness to God's love, doing non-violence training, worshipping regularly in front of a weapons manufacturer, addressing climate change, working in the Sanctuary and immigration movements, and being involved in Cambridge Friends School as a small set of examples. The New Story Group has long been meeting to explore the intersection of Quaker beliefs and science in relation to the environment. There is hope from this group that the tide may be turning, and awareness that the gifts of Quakerism are ready-made to fit into the larger world view. All this good work and more addresses the huge challenges in our country and world, and allows that any one of us does not have to address all of society's wrongs. We can follow our own leadings while we support each other in community. Still, many wish for more common witnesses to share among the whole meeting.

The meeting community is impacted by the political climate, the secularization of our society, the fear of climate change, and global unrest. We are not isolated. We hope our community can be a place of refuge and of support to effect change in the world around us. Many are looking more deeply and carefully at Quaker faith and practice in the hope that we might better understand, foundationally, how to find our way. We are searching for the Truth from early Friends in order to live out that Truth today. Are we following their example of radical transformation and witness in the world? What steps might we take as a community to foster the beloved community among us and in the wider world?

With all this, there are joyous exchanges with new and long-time Friends. There are new and younger faces that seem to be searching for meaning and growth in a spiritual community. Friends look to meet the challenge of hearing and bearing with each other in love and tenderness, understanding, and forgiveness, especially when there is anger and hurt, while not backing off from discomfort as we examine our society and ourselves.

For all this work we seek God's guidance even while we feel the ground on which our society rests shifting beneath our feet.

At a gathering held for the community to share experiences and thoughts about our spiritual health, it was suggested we end the report with some queries. To that end we include this excerpt from Britain Yearly Meeting's chapter on Advice and Queries.

"Our diversity invites us both to speak what we know to be true in our lives and to learn from others. Friends are encouraged to listen to each other in humility and understanding, trusting in the Spirit that goes beyond our human effort and comprehension. So it is for the comfort and discomfort of Friends that these advices and queries are offered, with the hope that we may all be more faithful and find deeper joy in God's service."

As our meeting moves into the future, these queries might help:

- As FMC leans into this work of learning and Spirit's call, we are going to fall short. How do we all hold each other in those moments and grow there?

- Can our community work harder to lift up each other's gifts and contributions while avoiding looking for mistakes? Can we be more gentle with and supportive of each other?
- What practices does FMC hold on to and what should be let go as our meeting strives to share power more equally, chip away at oppressive behavior, and be more welcoming?
- How can FMC be more transparent in our structures and practices for the benefit of all?
- What does FMC need to do to better support and integrate with its families and young adult Friends?
- What voices are we not hearing?