

State of Society Report 2022-23 – revised to reflect perspectives raised in Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business

(Initial version Approved by Ministry and Counsel on April 18, 2023, and Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business on May 21, 2023)

In the winter of early 2023, many of us at Friends Meeting at Cambridge (FMC) still feel ourselves to be in an interim, a meanwhile. Both the covid pandemic and the polarization that affects our wider society continue to raise challenges through which we seek a tender unity under Love's guidance. We are doing our best to shape, and to live into, nourishing spiritual and community practices. In this challenge and seeking is where we so often feel the Spirit of Love at work in and among us. Friends also expressed a sense of appreciation and joy at the continuing opportunities to gather and seek together, and to explore Quakerism. Here are some of the ways Friends are expressing the "both...and" of our community and worship life right now.

The meeting has been a rock to many of us during this uncertain time. Somehow through God's grace we have adapted to experiencing Spirit using technology, better than I would have ever predicted. There is joy!

Because of the pandemic it has been a rough time physically. People feel more fragile or vulnerable. Everyone knows people who have died or been very sick. You used to know your place in the world but now it's all up in the air—folks are vulnerable, defensive, protective.

It is not an easy time, and yet the voice of Spirit is there to be heard. The pandemic doesn't jar the faith but does jar the outward modes of coming together to help each other keep the faith. We have been seeking ways to keep the faith. This is good work.

I am aware of a lot of grief, longing, confusion, and estrangement. Certainly Covid contributed mightily to this.

We are called to be in community, to care for one another, to believe in the light in each other, in our ability to experience the divine and to know some part of the truth. One does not make gospel order alone, and so we are called to do the most difficult thing: be in community. Signing up for coffee, remembering to bring slippers in messy weather, showing up on time on zoom, is preparing for community.

There is a yearning to be together more freely as Covid lessens but doesn't vanish:

I wonder whether we have enough time together to casually check in with each other.

Sharing food, time, space with each other—those things are needed for deeper conversations.

As many pandemic restrictions lift, those who are able to do so come together for post-worship socializing and simple meals. As one Friend said, "I am tired, yes. But I feel such joy at seeing

your faces again.” Another celebrated the returning opportunities to welcome and involve newcomers. Another Friend reminds us of “the power of a mailed and signed letter, a gentle phone call, an actual visit, and the genuine effort at keeping up in a genuine and not pro-forma sense.”

We seek to grow spiritually by seeking Love’s guidance as we encounter divided opinions and leadings over tech, hybrid worship, masking... and topics not so divisive but still inviting growth, such as Indigenous issues and land acknowledgement. The thoughtful groups formed to help us season these issues have called us together not so much to “thresh” as to listen to each other as deeply as we can. And yet some among us do not feel heard.

We have felt Spirit’s presence as we wrestle our way towards understanding our path on Indigenous matters. From Friends for Racial Justice:

During the discussion on the land acknowledgement adoption, Friends really engaged. We asked hard questions. We listened and grew together. We on FORJ were delighted that the Meeting decided also to ask: How are we living into the Land Acknowledgement as we go forward?

As a predominantly white and relatively affluent meeting, we continue to challenge ourselves to understand the impact of white supremacy culture on what we think of as “the Quaker way.”

Amidst conflicting opinions on these and other issues, some Friends worry: “Have we lost our ability to truly listen to the other?” ... “We are good people who want to do good work. We love one another. We mean well. We contain enormous creative potential. Why do we get stuck and so often fail to acknowledge it?” ... “I sense that we are hurrying to get things done; I hunger for us to slow things down, to discern well and deeply.”

Countless Friends express gratitude for the small groups that continue to give us opportunities to know each other in the Spirit:

Small groups over past few years have anchored me, helped me feel not so alone.

I’ve experienced spiritual uplift in the white supremacy reading group; the new story group is evolving beautifully, lots of spiritual and intellectual excitement there; the Somerville worship group is smaller entity where we can get to know each other.

Groups like the prayer circle and the Sci-Fi reading group create connections between individuals that form a foundation for worship as a community. If you just walk in the door without knowing people, worship is substantially different.

Hearing the spiritual journeys of others at the Sunday morning Forum deepens my own spiritual journey.

When I filled out the Disability and Accessibility Awareness and Coordination Working Group survey I was so moved by the depth of the survey work that it inspired me to join

the working group, and gratefully give back to a beautiful community of Friends who have lovingly supported me in over a decade of personal healthcare challenges.

As one Friend reflected, these many groups are background structures that can deepen our sense of the Spirit and that we can bring into Meeting for Worship and Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business. Adult religious education opportunities invite us to be more grounded in our Quaker history and process. Faithfulness groups deepen our spiritual life by inviting us to know each other in the Spirit. Clearness and support committees are spiritually deepening for the focus person and also very much for those participating.

Hybrid Worship and activities continue to bring both challenges and gifts. In particular, worship via video conferencing is difficult or even feels impossible for some of us, helps some of us deepen, and makes worship accessible for those usually closed out by disability or distance.

To find the Spirit in zoom worship was surprising, how I felt a palpable sense of communal worship despite distance.

I've been so happy to find that if I am faithful to the same practices of deepening and inner listening that I summon when worshipping "in the room"—if, that is, I bring that same willingness to give myself over to worship—worship via zoom [is] spiritually nourishing, and I feel times of deep oneness among us all.

I used to feel light and goodness sitting in meeting looking at people, but I don't feel as I did before Covid. It's the hybrid, all the little things that happen.

It feels more challenging to get a "sense of the community"—to get a feel for the community as a whole.

We are embodied, limited beings; how we come together literally is inseparable from how we come together spiritually. Hybrid worship, it seems to me, is the elephant in the room.

I find myself curious at the choice made by quite a few Friends in these less covid-fraught times electing to show up by screen, and find myself saddened by it.

I have felt great joy in Family Worship this year. The Friends who organize Family Worship do an incredible job of creating a rich experience for those "in the room" and those present online. The worship has felt truly gathered.

We have had to stretch to do the work involved in making video conferencing possible, and are gratified that this makes worship and community available to Friends and seekers who can't be physically present. As an attender from the West writes:

I am thankful for your allowing me to participate in two zoom programs, one on being new to Quakerdom, also the zoom options for services and dropping in. Thank you for your generosity.

With all the changes and accommodations brought about by Covid and the resulting hybrid worship and business, there is much to do...

It feels the community is more stretched out in so many ways—partially by having expanded geographically distant people into the community via zoom. Maybe stretched also in terms of the number of volunteers we've increasingly needed over the past 3 years.

There is more work than hands; there is less flexibility and kindness. We are operating from a place of scarcity. How can we be accessible to another group of people when we can barely take care of those we have.

I see FMC in a state of transition, as we re-think staffing, reopening, etc. Despite that transitional state, we are still alive and vibrant.

There is a relatively small group that carries most of the weight of keeping FMC going.

As Friends rise to the many tasks, we ask: When does burnout sap the Spirit in us? How will we recognize when we are over taxed? Does overwork lead us to become controlling? Is there more work than we are able to do?

We seek Spirit in the questions we raise with each other, and the listening that must follow. We ask, for instance: As a relatively affluent meeting, are we “overspending” when we go over budget? What does Love ask of us when there is need everywhere? We also asked ourselves this year, through a survey created by Peace and Social Justice: How are we as individual Friends witnessing to the world based on our testimonies? What can we learn from each other about witness? Can we join in unified witness? As one Friend said, “Right now, Meeting does not confront us. It's a place of comfort. But what is the balance between comfort and stretch?”

Friends seek to be good employers who support FMC staff to do their best. This year, we heard from a resigning staff member who had given a lot to the community during the Covid years. In her generously honest feedback, she lifted up themes that we have heard before. She mentioned the impact of a few “labor intensive” people who considered her or the center residents “hired help” and thus made her position difficult, and how she often felt that she had “no agency to do her job.” She recommended improved communication between decision makers and the community, more stability of project decisions midstream once a contract has been signed, and better clarity about which committee or group has the “final” say on a particular topic. We are working, today, to pay closer attention to these concerns.

In this gathering of Friends' reflections on the spiritual state of our meeting, a few overall themes emerge. What themes do you hear? There is a lively diversity of strongly held opinions, a reckoning with the changed possibilities and challenges opened by on-line options; there is joy and disappointment, concern and hope. We are eager to find our balance as we emerge from the ways that the pandemic affected and still affects us as individuals and as a community. May our longing to be together in the Spirit be our guide.

