

State of Society Report 2016

Friends Meeting at Cambridge is first and foremost a place of worship, a place where individuals come to seek that of God in one another and themselves in all forms. At the same time, it is also a working non-profit that employs staff, keeps financial records, maintains buildings and is a community resource for its many members and attenders, as well as for organizations in the wider Boston area. It is a place of action, a place where individuals can be inspired by each other's work on their various concerns and share this fellowship, from climate change to racial justice to prison ministry. Finally it is a place of community, where individuals feel known and cared for and where they find both spiritual and physical support in times of difficulty and great joy. It is a place where parents bring their children for community, religious education and an opportunity to learn essential values and truths. The Meeting has made strides in all these areas over the past year, amidst ongoing challenges.

Community:

The Meeting has many ongoing activities that predate 2016 and enrich each of us, including Forum, Afterthoughts, committee meetings, and other activities. Over the past year the Simple Lunch has now become an integral, joyous, and indispensable part of our First Days: one of the few times in the week when large numbers of us meet and uncover new and hidden connections. The Young Adult Friends group is also thriving, meeting for fellowship at monthly potlucks and other activities.

One of our community challenges is also a strength—our size. One Friend noted “to create community, it would be helpful to have a task, a product that we all do together.” While the Meeting has not found one project that engages us all, there have been widespread Meeting projects such as attending the White Privilege Conference and follow-up activities. More than two dozen individuals attended the conference, with an equal number of “partners” remaining back at home, meeting, praying, and talking with the conference attenders after the Conference. This has led to several forums, a Sunday afternoon session and renewed interest and excitement in the exploring our role in the issue of white supremacy. Other long-term community witness activities include the monthly worship at Textron Industries, which makes cluster bombs, and our involvement in the Quaker Voluntary Service house in Dorchester, MA.

Many Friends also noted that while we might care about one another within our boundaries, we do much less well with caring for those outside our doors. It remains a source of frustration and sadness that we have not provided a better welcome to more people of color or other diverse individuals.

The Meeting undertook outreach to a broader community of individuals, by placing advertisements in newspapers such as the *Metro* and *Spare Change*; however, this has not significantly altered who attends the Meeting.

Friends are significantly more hopeful when reflecting on the support and fellowship that they feel *within* our doors. When asked what makes the Meeting unique, *community* and all that entails come up repeatedly. Individual connections, organic supports, conversations about matters large and small are all part of the essential fabric of the Meeting.

Over the past year it became clear that while the organic connections within the Meeting continued to flourish, the Care and Support Committee was struggling. After much discernment the Committee decided to lay itself down for a year, with Ministry and Counsel tasked with filling the void in the interim and planning next steps. The community as a whole discerned on what Care and Support has meant and

should mean to individuals, but the task of creating a next phase to care for one another's emotional, physical and spiritual needs remains ongoing. Another challenge is how the Meeting addresses conflict between individual members and attenders, a topic that remains a difficult one to address given the intensity of emotions involved in such discussions.

Action:

The Society of Friends has a long and complicated relationship to social justice causes and the Meeting reflects that today. One Friend commented that given this heritage it is surprising that the committees that focus on this work (Friends for Racial Justice, Peace and Social Concerns, Prison Fellowship, Cambridge Quaker Earthcare Witness, etc.) are not more at the forefront of the Meeting's attention. The Meeting only recently united around collectively placing a Black Lives Matter placard in front of the Meetinghouse. More recently the Meeting has also developed a Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, Queer and plus (LGBTQ+) working group that has emerged to provide leadership in helping the Meeting to welcome and support individuals with these identities.

The election and inauguration have provided a "kick in the pants": new energy and projects are emerging quickly along with flexibility to meet the urgent nature of concerns. Some events in response to concerns about the national government included a Meeting for Worship on Inauguration Day, a get-together for phoning and writing postcards to legislators, a committee sponsoring a candlelight vigil to support of refugees, and interest in a sanctuary church movement within Harvard Square. It would seem that in the current political climate, Friends are returning to Meeting to find not only a place for worship, but also a place to support their political action. It remains a balancing act for the Meeting to meet every individual where they are politically and spiritually. This is a balance that the Meeting has yet to fully reach, but one there is much energy and commitment to achieving such a balance.

Administrative

One purpose of the Beneficial Cycle (BC) program that Meeting has been engaged in for several years was to experiment by investing some of the savings of the Meeting with what would increase vitality without having to worry about money. Over the past five years, the majority of the BC money expended has been spent on staff. While there is a continued discussion about the place of paid staff at the present time the Meeting appears to have committed to hiring staff to accomplish needs of the Meeting for which volunteers can't be found. The Meeting has continued to fund a portion of the salary for the Resident Friend, the Youth Ministries and Education Coordinator and multiple part-time hourly staff. The half-time Communications Coordinator position is fully funded by the Beneficial Cycle.

In addition, this past year has seen several other positive steps regarding staffing. The Meeting hired: a new Nursery Coordinator, a new Facilities Manager and the new Youth Ministries and Education Coordinator. Each has brought a needed energy and vision to the administrative work of the Meeting. It was with sadness that the Meeting learned that Resident Friend, Sharon Frame, would be resigning her position as of August 1st, 2017. While Friends remain grateful for her time with the Meeting, individuals are already looking towards the future and what a new Resident Friend might mean for us.

Even more prosaically and yet even more central to the day-to-day operating of the Meeting has been financial bookkeeping, our personnel manual and our office operations. These are the nuts-and-bolts that

allow the Meeting to function and having overhauled them allows the Meeting to spend more time on vision and less time tracking down errant receipts. In addition, there is new conversation about how to redesign both our public and our community website to make them more accessible and to increase our social media presence. Asking individuals for money has never been a strength of the Meeting, but in the past fiscal year, due to the dedicated work of multiple individuals, the Meeting not only met its fundraising goal but surpassed it by several thousand dollars. If the value of the Meeting is something that individuals believe in, it is important that they be willing to pledge their monetary support for the value offered.

Spiritual

How does one sum up the spiritual life of a Meeting? Is it in the regularly attended Meeting for Worship on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings and Wednesday mornings? The monthly Family Worship that attracts both young families and many adults unaccompanied by children? The more than 50 people who regularly attend the Meeting for Business in Worship? The clearness and support committees that strive to assist individual members/attenders with specific concerns? The committees that carry out the bulk of the Meeting's work? The Beneficial Cycle Coordinating Group, which reports that the "essence of vitality is how we know one another"? The retreats that allow for deeper reflection and spirituality? Is it all of these things and also so much more?

What is clear is that the Meeting continues to offer individuals with widely varying spiritual practices a chance to connect with one another. Ironically, when Friends are asked to reflect on the state of our society, spirituality remains least likely to be expressed in their reflection. This is in part due to the diversity among spiritual practices even within the confines of a silent Meeting for worship and in part, as one Friend commented, due to the difficulty we find in directly addressing our spiritual lives. Yet we remain a worship community and one always striving to better ourselves. While we have not yet reached perfection here, as in many other matters, the heart of the Meeting and the spiritual home for all of us that lies in the wooden benches and open room that beckon us weekly.