

State of Society for 2019

Friends Meeting at Cambridge (FMC) is in the novel position of looking back at the state of our society in 2019 as we rely on virtual tools in spring 2020 to be in community. The impact of the coronavirus is building around us. Those of us who can, self-isolate and practice rigorous hand washing hoping to flatten the curve of infections. Our hearts are troubled by the risks and worries of all those struggling with the impacts of this crisis today, and our nerves are jangling with uncertainty. It is overwhelming to consider our beloved community's condition back in 2019. Mourning what we've lost demonstrates how much we valued what we may have taken for granted.

During 2019, the community reflected on the queries "What Does Love Look Like in Challenging Times?" "What does love look like in worship?" and "What does love look like in our gatherings outside worship?" We carried these queries into meetings in which we grappled with our financial deficit, wondered together about our priorities and whether we should be planning from a perspective of plenty or scarcity. During several threshing sessions grappling with these questions, we realized we needed to come to some unity on these questions before we could fruitfully discuss specific budgetary changes.

There has been some discouragement voiced that it is hard to build discernment on these important matter when Friends come into a discussion unprepared. When attendance is varied and sporadic and Friends do not read in preparation for a meeting, momentum is lost. It also seems challenging to adequately introduce and educate newcomers into business and discernment practices. How can we address this? How do we both make expectations and practices transparent while welcoming all who seek us out? Yet the Meeting did accept suggested steps for a way forward. Perhaps this Friend's experience is key, "My experience of our called meeting for worship last Sunday was conducted in a way that was experimental, playful and humble. We approved 10 (financial) recommendations with language that 'we will try something'.

Our worship has drawn many Friends—new faces including younger adults, and long-time members and attenders. Forums that precede worship are well attended. Faithfulness groups and all-Meeting retreats help us hear and know each other more completely, find common ground and trust, and grow in faith.

Young Adult Friends (YAFs) have brought depth and Spirit to our wider community, in addition to gathering for potlucks of their own. They have been partners in care of meeting for worship, Afterthoughts, and forums, and young families have taken part in greeting people entering the Meeting House on Sunday mornings. These pairings both strengthen our ministry and allow a fuller experience of God in our midst for all. Ministry & Counsel also brought dinner to the Quaker Voluntary Service (QVS) members for an evening of sharing and laughter. These new connections have led to the building of relationships outside of worship that feel life giving.

Our community continues to live into a 2018 query, "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?" An optional practice of saying our preferred pronouns when we introduce ourselves, as a means of conveying welcome to gender non-binary and trans friends, has become more natural to many, though not to all. The LGBTQ+ Working Group has led us in learning and activism, including a yearly memorial for trans women who have been murdered. The White Privilege book group seeks to apply their reading to community interactions by practicing possible scenarios of racist, ablest or homophobic statements that need intervention. Two FMC Friends have been active in New England Yearly Meeting's Noticing Patterns of Oppression and Faithfulness Working Group. Some thirty Friends returned from Yearly Meeting Sessions in August, inspired by the vision and practices of the "Noticing Patterns" experiment,

which resonates with the work of our Friends for Racial Justice and Peace and Social Justice committees.

The weekly West African Drumming Circle is another place where we learn to become part of a wider and more justice-seeking community. One member writes: “At the drumming circle, conversation about racism builds community and allows more of us to fathom the painful experience and dynamics of white racism, in a joyful and playful context of sound and rhythmic communication. Long-time Friends and newcomers are privileged to learn from and support our remarkable teacher.” By participating in the Material Aid and Assistance Program (MAAP) that operates out of a large room in the meeting house basement, a number of Friends learn to support and empower community members experiencing homelessness or living in poverty, through material aid, access to resources, and advocacy opportunities. The Wednesday evening Sharing Circle meets weekly to support people coming out of incarceration. As one participant wrote: “The Sharing Circle is ours, present, an ongoing ministry: a piece of the Wholeness we yearn for. Indigenous wisdom urges decision-makers to consider how each outcome will affect the seventh generation. I want to believe that because FMC is deeply connected with MAAP and the Sharing Circle, our ‘we’ is broader and deeper, and that informs how we are.”

As the community grapples with being more welcoming and growing into a broader ‘we’, hurtful mistakes still happen despite the experience of many that worship is deep and powerful. We seek to grow in the faith and trust that allows us to speak more truth to one another, to speak and hear with compassion, and to stay with discomfort, as part of living more fully into the Quaker testimony of equality.

The queries “How are we doing in the FMC community to support and integrate families and young adult Friends? What are we doing well and what can we do better?” are partially answered by this Friend who says, “The nursery is bursting at the seams, but there is no active high school program and the First Day School (FDS) classrooms have been combined due to low numbers.” Some of our “babies” are now toddlers and preschoolers, so they are ready to graduate from the nursery. FDS/Youth Programs Committee is talking about ways to welcome families and do outreach to attract more families. Our Youth Ministries and Education Coordinator has been leading a combined group of 14 7th-9th graders from FMC and First Parish (UU) in Cambridge in the “Our Whole Lives” program, which engages questions of relationships and sexuality and has been well received. The new FDS curriculum is in its first year, with each month having a theme. The theme is also carried into Family Worship, readings, projects and speakers. In addition, over the last year FDS has sponsored several different events such as intergenerational worship, a family camping trip, and the selling of 35 homemade pies to raise over \$800 in support of a bilingual center in La Paz Bolivia and the Meeting.

Five beloved and active members of FMC died this past year, following losses the year before. Those missing faces, voices, and witnesses weigh heavy upon the community. Losing elders who embodied the practice of Quakerism in ways that taught others, often beyond words, has left a thinner connection to the early roots in primitive Christianity and its language. While many in our meeting still find strength in Christian language and belief, others use more universal language of Spirit or human connection, for instance. Still others are seekers for what does speak to them and how to articulate those beliefs. The New Story Group offers new language that speaks to some, but not all. There is a tension between using language meaningful to us and

assuming that we honor other language. Some call out for a shared language and a way to convey the experiential mystery in ways that work for us and for our children.

The query “How do we lift up each other’s gifts and contributions?” can be answered in many ways. One is the legacy a late community member left that allows FMC’s Avison Committee the joy of distributing money to “help improve the lives of children: helping them grow into productive, caring yet savvy human beings.” This generosity allows the Meeting to make love tangible by providing support to children in communities we regrettably notice are probably not part of our direct Meeting community. In addition, Meeting for Business in Worship, each committee and staff member giving a report is held in the Light as FMC strives to thank and honor those who toil for the community.

Clerk’s Team, so involved in all aspects of the Meeting, responded to the overarching query “What does Love look like in challenging times” with this: The power of Love brings us to FMC every week, but sometimes our worries about the state of the world interfere. We’ve felt sustained by Simple Lunch, Adult Education, etc., in the midst of some very challenging conversations and discernment. Activist experiences remind us of the fact that there are good people everywhere; we are not alone in our responsibility for the world. Crisis means opportunity. The query takes us back to the beginning of Friends: God in each person; but that isn’t enough—we are called to love actively and put that insight into practice. Look at the abundance of our potlucks, Simple Lunches, and how we have so many people participating. Service to the community is a wonderful way to express our love. We get angry with people we love, not those who we don’t care about; we stay in the relationship. We love having young people showing up to lunch as we all can get to know each other in deeper ways and share the experience of Quaker community.

Although the sharing of food and fellowship in person was suspended for now, we hope to nurture and extend the bonds we have established over the past year, with God’s help and guidance. One reason we had so many people staying for lunch was because outside there was (and is) so much anger and fear. The hope is for FMC to be a place of sanctuary.

There is creativity and flexibility abounding as Friends learn how to use Zoom to connect with each other, to hold meetings, and to join together in worship – to remain socially and spiritually active while physically distant. We already see ways that using technology might be able to involve people who have been unable to join us. We wonder how these lessons might enhance our togetherness and inclusiveness in the future. We have seen the faces on Zoom of Friends who moved away, and in one case deported. Faces and names are displayed together to help us know each other. One Friend with hearing loss reports with joy that, in Zoom worship, she can hear the vocal ministry. At the same time, not everyone who might want to join in worship, un-programmed social time or impromptu offerings has the luxury of internet access or the freedom from parenting or work responsibilities to do so. The question of inclusiveness remains multi-faceted.

The Pastoral Care team has been busy offering online opportunities for those who are isolated or worried, but are also reaching out to offer aid as needed in this crisis. Younger Friends are offering help to those who may be more impacted by the virus. At this moment, the full impact has not hit. We have yet to see how this current challenging time changes our community, and us, but we are seeing what Love looks and feels like.