

**Spiritual State of the Yearly Meeting Report 6th Month 2024 compiled
by the Ministry and Care Committee of Quaker Life Council from
reports submitted by Monthly and Quarterly Meetings**

For each monthly meeting, the practice of self-examination can provide "...a deep and meaningful opportunity that draws the community together".* Sharing this self-assessment with the yearly meeting allows us to come together as a larger community and helps Quaker Life Council better understand the strengths and weaknesses, needs and gifts of the monthly meetings.

Process:

About half (50) of the monthly meetings from across the Yearly Meeting submitted reports. Meetings received a general written request, and individual meetings were contacted directly by a member of Ministry and Care Committee. Some reports grew from input at business meetings, some from threshing sessions, others from the work of individuals or committees who gathered information from members of the meeting. Some responded to all the queries, while others selected queries to which to respond or reshaped the queries to facilitate writing their own narratives. (A link to the original invitation can be found here:

<https://www.pym.org/spiritual-state-of-the-meeting-invitation-2024/>

In preparing this report, one member of Ministry and Care Committee read all the reports. In addition, each member of the committee read reports from one or two quarters (about 12 reports for each committee member) and prepared a distilled report. These sources form the basis for the Spiritual State of the Yearly Meeting Report which was then read and commented on by all members of M&C. All the reports received from Monthly and Quarterly Meetings can be found here: <https://www.pym.org/state-of-the-meeting/>.. You are encouraged to read them!

Major themes that run through the reports are: reconnection; use of technology; renewed understanding of what it means to be a meeting; exploring ways to do business; property concerns; right relationship with the community; young adults, children and families; and enacting our testimonies.

This has been a year of seeking increased connection. Meetings, both large and small, are finding ways, including in-person worship, to reconnect, recommit and return to treasured activities as the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic recedes. Many comment on the joy in being together once again, and also recognize that their community has been forever changed.

Having learned to use technology during the pandemic, meetings are now being served by zoom and other platforms as a way to stay in touch and to decrease their carbon footprint while still allowing deeply centered worship and mutual care. From their experiences during the pandemic, many meetings have brought a commitment to the ongoing use of technology to allow those at a distance (current and would-be Friends) to participate in the life of the meeting. Many find that committee meetings easily lend themselves to an electronic format; however, some have found Zoom less conducive for meeting for business.

Friends regard their meetings as safe havens where members can gather and share in joy and gratitude as the Spirit moves among them. They appreciate the depth of silence in worship, which draws them closer and also creates an energy that grows from being gathered. They care for and about one another and share in seeking the beloved community.

The challenges of the past several years have encouraged consideration of what it means to be a meeting and what membership means as well. Meetings have come to understand that being gathered does not necessarily require being in the same location, nor does being in a single location guarantee the meeting will be gathered. For several meetings the question of “critical mass” has become very salient. Which committees are required? How much time face-to-face is necessary to form and maintain community?

The number of regular members and attenders as well as their age and other commitments all have impact on meetings both large and small. Use of committee of the whole and other alternative ways of accomplishing business has become more common. While for some this feels like a necessity because of small numbers of people willing and able to engage in the work, others have found that new structures allow for broader involvement. Some meetings, for example, are trying clerking teams where primary responsibility for the expected tasks of the clerk is shared on a rotating basis. More meetings are using Co-clerks. Several meetings are particularly concerned that young adults are not engaged in the life of the meeting. There is renewed attention to create opportunities for more people to take on leadership roles and to be successful.

Throughout the yearly meeting, the reality of older meetinghouses on larger properties with smaller and older populations of members and attenders have come together to create concern and challenge. Meetings have creatively sought solutions including sharing, selling or gifting their properties or seeking the funds necessary to maintain and continue to use what they have. Some meetings are finding new uses for their land which supports greater climate consciousness. Other meetings with historic meeting houses have not chosen to make changes that might improve their climate or accessibility impact.

Meetings seek various ways to let their community know who they are and what they believe. They are concerned about maintaining and strengthening their relationships with the community, seeking both to outreach to potential new attenders and to be good neighbors. Many share space with other groups, (e.g. schools, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, etc.) and engage the broader community in meeting activities of interest (e.g. book

groups). Several meetings are engaged in growing medicinal plants for companies like Singularity Botanicals. Meetings and their members contribute generously to support and advocate for social justice causes and have publicly addressed issues such as gun violence, mental health support in prisons, and book banning, engaging in social justice work that allows them to share testimonies and beliefs with the broader community. They are advocates for the LGBTQ Community and meetings have participated in Pride parades. Meetings reach out to their quarter as a way to stay connected to the broader Quaker world. Those meetings which have found their numbers in attendance on First Day have not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels are working to learn how to be smaller.

Meetings small and large are rededicating to providing religious education in some form for children and adults as well. Meetings see this as part of striving to be welcoming and engaging particularly to families with children. For the small meeting, providing educational and enriching experiences for all (e.g. religious instruction for youth and forums for younger and older adults as well as multi-generational worship where all are welcomed) is a challenge. Several meetings have engaged in intergenerational worship with considerable success and great joy. Many meetings support the formation of book clubs, spiritual groups, and accompaniment for individuals' spiritual journeys. Often, meetings open experiences to individuals in the larger community who express interest in participating in these activities, combining in-reach and development of programs for current members and attenders with outreach to the broader community.

We are often engaged in social action, predominately as individuals but sometimes as a monthly meeting wide witness. A number of meetings have members who are very active in anti-racism work and some have engaged in learning about reparations. Desire to increase awareness and to find appropriate action moving forward to combat racism in its many forms has engaged many meetings.

Many meetings are engaged in activities either as a meeting or as individuals that are consistent with the witness on climate, though only a few have appointed a climate witness liaison. Most cite the lack of sufficient person-power to do so. Several meetings have installed solar panels to decrease their carbon footprint. Others have engaged in plantings and other property redesign that are more climate aware. One meeting notes the inclusion of a green burial option in their graveyard and another is exploring this possibility.

Several themes emerge where we can learn from and support one another:

- +attracting and keep families with young children,
- +increasing capacity for religious education for children,
- +receiving effective assistance with outreach,
- +engaging and supporting young adults in the meeting community
- +dealing with property effectively

Regarding outreach, one meeting suggests that reaching out to newcomers by wondering what the meeting can do for them rather than what they can do for the meeting has been successful in encouraging newcomers to return. Many meetings are engaged in re-committing to the “how, when and why” of vocal ministry and helping those in attendance find the right balance for sharing during worship; this can make the worship feel more accessible, particularly to newcomers.

Community lunches, picnics, retreats, forums, game nights, community sings, progressive dinners at the meetinghouse, adults sharing their time and attention with children, making frequent personal connections with those in attendance, and taking care to create an inviting space in the meeting room for children, have all been cited as useful to strengthen connection and support deep worship. Creating a way of sharing clerking responsibilities (e.g. a clerks’ team, a clerks’ group, rotating clerkships) has been noted as useful for broadening the base on which responsibility for the conduct of business rests.

We need to better understand what works for a meeting community and to develop greater flexibility in our shared worship. We can express confusion and uncertainty even as we nurture a consistent, familiar and quiet space. While the silence is paramount for some, we can also encourage vocal ministry that improves on the silence. We want to encourage and maintain connection with children, families, young adults and older adults. We want to be clear about the relationship between our testimonies and how we conduct our lives, grounded in the gathered meeting and our shared connection to Spirit, focused on what is essential for us as Friends.

As meetings move further away from the stresses of the pandemic lockdown period, opportunities for learning, deepening and growing (whether or not in numbers) are many. Let us seize them together.