

**Outreach/Member Engagement Panel**  
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My Quaker resume includes a year traveling around the country with a grant from the Lyman Fund and PYM's Travel and Witness granting group. Part of that was learning about what outreach means to different Quaker meetings and churches. Currently I serve Haddonfield Quarter as the Quarter Coordinator and I am the lead on the South Jersey Quakers (SJQ) project. Outside of the Quaker world, I have a professional background in computer science, social work and nursing. I am a substitute school nurse and I have a little group home for adults with DDD.

I have been asked to speak to you about what we coined as self-audit or self-assessment and I'm going to use that language because it is the easiest to understand but I don't love it and here is why.

One of the most important parts of nursing is the assessment. Being able to do a fast and accurate assessment can absolutely make or break a nurse's career. For example: I could shake your hand and feel for your muscle tone to check for some common neurological conditions, feel your skin turgor to check for dehydration and nutritional status, look at your nail to see if your calcium is low or your blood pressure is high, and get your heart rate.

In all these things I am charting exceptions. In other words I am looking for what is wrong with you.

The other reason I don't like the word assessment in this context is because one goes into an assessment thinking they know what it means to be **right**. In the spirit of continuing revelation, we as Quakers, are always learning what that is.

So, when I talk about self-assessment today, remember to keep an open mind and look for what's right along with what needs improvement. Remember some things are within our control, while others are not. Similarly, there are things we can assess and others we can't.

3 of the assessments I would like to talk to you about today include:

- how we welcome newcomers,
- what we call outreach,
- and why we do it.

But first, let me explain why self-assessment is crucial:

1 The Comfort Trap: Our meetings often feel like coming home, with familiar faces, routines, and comforting silence. We tend to overlook small details that are the first thing newcomers notice, such as the entrance sign.

2 We Don't Know What We Don't Know: Self-assessment is like turning on the lights in a dark room. Until we look, we can't truly understand what needs improvement.

3 Overcoming Inertia: It's easy to avoid a full self-assessment because it takes time and energy. Often, we actively resist it, fearing what we might discover.

### **How we welcome**

I'm going to outline the workshop I developed for HMM under the care of the Worship and Ministry Committee. The main goal of this workshop was to develop an actionable plan that was agreed upon by the meeting at large and that W+M could then implement. The secondary goal was to get people thinking about how they welcome on an individual level. The workshop took place in three days over consecutive weeks.

This first day we focused a lot on our senses and the sensory experiences we associated with that very first day of worship. We started with a tour of the parking lot. The idea was to go out to the parking lot and make ourselves a little dizzy to simulate the disorientation someone coming to the meeting house for the first time might feel. We walked up to the meeting as if we were driving down the street approaching the building, looking for the signs, a place to park, the entrance, the grounds, the accessibility, etc..

We then entered the meeting house and simulated what it might be like for a seeker on their first day of worship. We talked about how someone might feel when looking for a place to sit, whether they are welcomed at the door, how they might feel being put on the spot to introduce themselves, how/when/if they are approached after worship, and what impressions the seeker might take home with them.

For the next day we focused on our interactions and talked about some better ways to use language and communications when approaching potential Friends. Some of the skills we practiced were the use of positive language, i.e., speaking to what Quakers "are" instead of "not" and why it is important not to be critical of other branches of Quakerism and other religious groups. We practiced asking open-ended welcoming questions and listening when they answer. We talked about the importance of avoiding "jargon" so we can meet seekers where they are without seeming elitist. We had a pop quiz on Quaker acronyms.

The last day of the workshop we talked about some of the tangible resources we can give people, when to give them, and a timeline for continued meeting integration. We ended this day drafting a plan for that could be given back to Worship and Ministry to be implemented.

A lot of this is somewhat superficial, kinda the same way that shaking hands with someone doesn't really tell me who they are. But it is still important. The reason people come and the reason people stay are not always the same thing. And the biggest reason people stay is because they feel welcome.

### **What does your meeting call outreach?**

I recently heard someone use the word proselytizing as a better word for evangelizing in a Quaker context. It does not really feel better to me because we are not looking to convert anyone and both of those words imply we are doing it to bring people in and by extension get something back. It's been my experience that convinced Friends are generally convinced by

God and seekers generally don't need that much convincing. We are looking to give people the connection with God they have been seeking. We reach out for them, not for us.

There are different ways outreach tends to manifest:

- Some Meetings make themselves into a community events building. Hosting everything from fire safety to a soup kitchen. *Barnegat and FUM Greensboro*
- Some open their doors as a history attraction, inviting walk through tours, speaking about Quaker history and its influence in the region, and stories about the history of the meeting house. *Haddonfield and Woodbury*
- Some Meetings do outreach by feeding people or teaching them how to farm. *Newton*
- Some Meeting do outreach by teaching classes in prison. *Mt Holly*
- Some Meetings keep an active presence in prisons. *Mt Holly and Haddonfield*
- Some meetings distribute printed materials.
- Most have an online presence.

All of these things work in that they will get your meeting exposure and get people in the door, but if you already do some of these and you have a steady stream of people coming in and out, a **welcoming assessment** might not be a bad idea.

Now I'm going to tell you why you should not do any of these things in order to get new members.

### Why outreach?

I'll start by pointing out that we are a fractured society. We all know it:

- We are struggling with things like transparency, equality, and we tend to put our faith into practice a little less often than maybe we should.
- We have an aging population which is not able to participate as much as they might like, which limits one's decision making abilities.
- A world wide pandemic didn't help.
- We have a history of being reluctant to change.

Given this, trying to get new members to save your meeting is like trying to use mud as mortar. It works until it rains. Well Friends, this is the rainy day.

The only way we will be able to let that fracture heal is by uniting.

- ❖ Most meetings will not have the means to be self-sustaining in 20 years. Less than 1/3 of Quaker meetings that were once in NJ still exist so we need to pool our resources
- ❖ Respond to your neighbors when they ask for help. This might mean closing your doors on a Sunday.
- ❖ Reach out without any expectations of pulling-in.

The problem with that expectation to pull-in is people pick up on it. The neurology of this has been studied extensively and should probably be explained by someone much more articulate than I, but it suffices to say that when we try to recruit we are in essence aligning

ourselves with every other religion who says, “this is the right way to do things.” This is the very same attitude many people came to Quakerism to escape.

Attitude and motivation are everything. I have seen attitude save patients’ lives who should be dead. Likewise I have watched patients die of relatively minor illnesses because they feel they have nothing left to live for.

It is my belief that we don’t have as much control over our lives and our decisions as we think we do or ought to. At the end of the day we are essentially giant walking chemical reactions and given the same conditions, every chemical reaction is going to happen the same way. But if we change our motivation, we change our perception and that changes the conditions in which these reactions take place.

So when I talk about outreach, remember to reach-out in service, reach out to touch that light in everyone, and try to remember that the harder that light is to find, the more important that outreach is. It should hurt. That’s how you know you’re doing it right.

### **How you know you’re on the right track**

So you’ve done your assessments; you’ve made the changes you can. It’s okay to take baby steps, but don’t drag your feet out of fear of failing. Remember some things we just don’t have control over and there are somethings you just can’t assess and one of them is how well any of the changes you made are going to bring in new members.

So besides the suffering of outreach, how do you know that you are on the right track?

- 1- People stop referring to your church as a museum.  
History is a huge draw for people who are well educated, have the time to read and study history, and have every one of their Maslovian needs met. But please remember we don’t worship in a museum. And a church isn’t where God lives.
- 2- People come to a second consecutive meeting.  
Lots of people come once out of curiosity, or on Christmas, or when they are visiting friends and family. Generally speaking those are not seekers in the strictest sense of the word.  
Of course we welcome them but those who are truly seeking usually don’t go looking for God just on holidays, or out of idle curiosity, or on their very best day ever. I don’t know that we do enough to meet these seekers where they are.
- 3- You see a demographic shift.  
Not just in terms of race and age and gender, but socioeconomically – increased physical and cognitive and neuro-diversity are just as important.
- 4- The mean age in the meeting moves closer to the middle.
- 5 - You need new name tags.
- 6 - You NEED a greeter

These are the litmus tests.

I talked a little bit about how we welcome. An important piece of that is the way we use language, not only to speak but to listen. I talked about one of our downfalls being our

reluctance to change. We see the main casualty in this reluctance in the young adult Friends community.

There are some young adults who need to be members of the yearly meeting because it is a requirement to serve on a given PYM committee and they don't have a home meeting. There are others who consider themselves members of their home Meeting but not of PYM mainly because their voices are not heard, so when I say listen what I really mean is hear them and if you don't know the difference ask, because they have a lot to say.\*

So even if you aren't able to do a full assessment, there are ways you can shake hands with your meeting and get a sense of what you are missing. Next time you come to meeting, take a different way to get there, park in a different parking spot, and try to get in the wrong door to see what it feels like.

The next time someone starts a conversation with you about an outreach activity, ask them, "who are we serving?" and the next time the next generation says they don't feel heard, the onus is on you to listen and ask yourself why.

Thank you.

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\* I wasn't going to share this but someone encouraged me to speak honestly. Until recently I was under the impression that the leadings of Young Adult Friends were secondary to those of older adults, at least that has been my experience on the yearly meeting level. One of the reasons I left the Travel and Witness Granting Group was because of the incredible restrictions put upon YAF's in the grant application process. And while I raised the issue at every meeting and no one seemed interested in changing, after about 6 years of serving as one of the two token young adult members, I gave up. It wasn't until recently I realized young adults were not supposed to be considered extensions of their parents, an extra set of hands to do the grunt work, or a token body to fill a rule.

