



Spiritual State of the Yearly Meeting Report 2023

As of this writing, about half of the meetings in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, (including a representative sample of large, small, urban, suburban and rural meetings) have responded to the request to share information about their spiritual state.

These suggested queries were used by some meetings as the foundation for writing their reports:

- 1) **In this past year, how has your meeting worked to create and strengthen the reality of a Beloved Community? How has your meeting fostered an environment in which members and attenders of all ages know they are loved, cared for, trusted, and respected?**
- 2) **How have you sought to be neighbors and in relationship with other communities?**
- 3) **How has your meeting been called to address issues of racism this past year? What additional concerns and initiatives have your meeting or meeting members been led to address?**
- 4) **How has the Spirit guided your work on climate change? How has your meeting addressed the five action areas identified in the Climate Change Sprint Report? Has your Meeting appointed a Climate Witness liaison?**
- 5) **What learnings and yearnings particular to your meeting would you like to share?**
- 6) **What are things the Yearly Meeting might do to support your meeting?**

Those meetings who choose not to use these queries used a variety of different processes to craft their reports. Some met several times as a committee of the whole to consider the spiritual condition of the meeting, while others received an assessment from a small group or groups which were then considered by the larger group. Once the reports were received, at least two members of PYM's Ministry and Care Committee read each of the reports. We now share this "snapshot" of our spiritual life as a Yearly Meeting. The full reports, including those received after the crafting of this report, can be found on the Yearly Meeting website – and the Ministry and Care Committee invites you read at least those reports from meetings in your Quarter. We learned a lot from reading them and believe you will too. There are concerns and challenges and also joys and triumphs from which we can all benefit.

Most meetings have returned to in-person worship. Friends have found Zoom continues to be exceedingly helpful in maintaining the meeting community, even though the technology can present challenges. Some are still seeking how best to use technology for online and hybrid

meetings that are as inclusive as possible. Whether for committee meetings, waiting worship, conduct of business or opportunities for fellowship, Zoom has allowed people to be involved who would not be involved otherwise, and Friends report that worship can be deep even when not everyone is in the same physical space.

Friends yearn for a return to pre-pandemic activities and closeness. Deeper intimacy and spiritual growth require opportunities to spend time together in listening and sharing, above and beyond weekly attendance at Meeting for Worship. We have a rich tradition of “small groups,” outside the time of First Day worship; however, this may have waned somewhat in recent years, partly due to Covid. Some are taking on the challenge to replicate the close interpersonal engagement while still attending to health concerns for members who may be more susceptible to infection or complications from Covid due to other medical conditions or who may suffer compromised health due to age. Some meetings find they are returning with profit to well publicized intergenerational retreats “to be still, refocus, and spend time together.” Well-attended monthly potlucks at the rise of meeting and monthly game nights, rotating to different Friends’ homes, Friendly 8’s or other similar activities have helped rekindle or foster stronger relationships. There is an emphasis on inclusion noted by many communities.

A number of meetings have expressed concern about not having enough Friends willing and able to take on leadership roles. Where shrinking numbers of attenders at meeting and fewer people able to take on leadership roles has taken a toll, some meetings have found they can reimagine their governance structure to make it better adapted to their needs and abilities. Fewer committees and a revision of the use of Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business have been a successful, if not always a comfortable way forward for some meetings. But addressing these and other needs, often at long distance, has not been free of conflict, and several meetings recognize a need for better conflict-resolution strategies.

Some meetings yearn for more children and seek a more vibrant multi-generational community. A few meetings have found inter-generational activities and a vibrant program responsive to the needs of both younger friends and their parents provide an opportunity to enrich the life in the Spirit for all. Emphasis on building First Day School programming, making sure there are enough adults to be with the children, and finding ways of fostering meaningful multi-generational work and worship are important ingredients as meeting communities rebuild and present challenges meetings strive to meet.

The past two years have brought decreased contact with the broader community. This year has marked a return to engagement with other congregations and ministerium groups which has brought both challenges and rewards. Partnering with a single congregation has brought the opportunity to work on issues of racial justice. During this year, meetings have been reaching out to their local communities and in some cases, the wider virtual community, in many ways that include developing webinars, supporting food pantries and other local organizations that provide

support to those in need, supporting a local Friends School and Peace Center, and participating virtually in World Quaker Day.

Some meetings are taking on the challenge of moving toward being an anti-racist faith community and engaging in the learning and sharing to make that shift. Engaging in this challenge has taken many different forms, depending on the community in which the meeting is located. Awareness of privilege and the responsibilities it brings have led some meetings to study and share, mostly through reading, speakers, videos, and discussion. One meeting has done some outreach with a local Spanish speaking community. Some Friends have been attending local NAACP meetings, while others are involved in interracial and interfaith organizations. Some have provided concrete assistance to individuals facing food and housing insecurity. Working cooperatively with area congregations from other faith traditions, meeting members have provided meals to families in need and established opportunities to interact with neighbors on a more personal level. Several meetings have begun to reflect on what it means to worship on land that was taken from the Lenape people and to consider their rightly ordered response. But most meetings acknowledge that more could be done.

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Sharing the meetinghouse and grounds with local organizations from the broader community has also resumed. Outreach is of deep concern for many meetings, whether to grow their membership or to uphold our testimonies in the world.

Several meetings seek to grow and simultaneously deepen their practice as Quakers. Strengthening leadership and increasing shared understanding of Quaker practice and tradition are seen as needs by several meetings. Re-establishing Adult Religious Education (with or without food) and providing opportunities for learning about Quakerism have been priorities over the year for many meetings in support of new members/attenders, encouraging spiritual growth and sharing.

The Yearly Meeting as a whole came under the weight of our climate witness. Some meetings are engaged in bringing this witness to fruition through engagement in a great variety of activities including: FCNL action steps, Citizen Climate Lobby, Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, switching to renewable electricity carriers, book discussions, the creation of webinars on environmental issues, educating themselves about climate change, volunteering with the Red Cross, recycling, and buying hybrid/electric cars. Various concrete ways of reducing our carbon footprint and addressing climate change have been undertaken: establishing more energy efficient and ecologically improved heating system; placing investments and equity funds in organizations that are environmentally, socially, and governmentally responsible; working with a local watershed protection group; building a composting toilet for a meetinghouse; using meeting dishes only and taking them home to wash and dry; establishing green burial grounds, and giving money to detect and remove landmines. We still must strive to come fully under the weight of our climate witness, but some meetings have been able to make a good beginning.

Several meetings took on the question of what the Yearly Meeting could do to help their meeting at this time with varied responses. Assistance with First Day School and Adult Religious Education as well as materials for newcomers were requested by several meetings. A few expressed concern about care of their property. Others raised the need for support in assuring

the future of their meeting as the membership aged and dwindled. Friends expressed concern about “getting the word out” that Quakers are still alive and present in their region. While outreach was a need expressed by several meetings, in-reach (including spiritual formation, religious education and assistance with addressing and resolving conflict) was also lifted up as a need several meetings acknowledged.

We can rejoice that across Philadelphia Yearly Meeting there are meetings thriving, looking for ways to rebuild and improve their worship, seeking growth, wanting to share treasured principles and practices, and striving to build a beloved community. We also must be aware that there are meetings who need help and support from other meetings in their quarterly meeting and also from the Yearly Meeting community. Putting our faith into practice, with grounded worship growing from shared understanding, we are creating the foundation for greater emphasis on social and racial justice activities, by valuing and supporting all in the community of the meeting. We continue to recover from the effects of our long isolation and the many complications of the pandemic – and we have grown and refocused as a result.

Respectfully Submitted,
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on Behalf of Worship and Care Committee of Quaker Life Council
with assistance in crafting the report from members of the Committee