

Homewood Friends Meeting

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report, 2015

It has become a Homewood annual tradition to hold a specially called meeting to assess our spiritual state. This year our meeting was held at our usual First Day worship time on 2/28/16. After a period of worship, 55 Homewood members and attenders responded to the following queries: *What are our strengths? What are our shortcomings? What do we envision for the future?* For the first time our children participated in this process, exploring the same queries in First Day School and creating a collage of their responses. At the conclusion of the adults' meeting, the children joined the adults and presented their findings. We all celebrated afterwards, singing "This Little Light of Mine," followed by a special luncheon provided by the Meeting.

Many commented that the sense of this year's meeting was quite different than in previous years - more grateful, more hopeful. Last year we identified a substantive list of challenges for Homewood including lack of sufficient numbers to support the work of the meeting, lack of diversity, deficits in our outreach, struggle to provide a vigorous education program for our small group of children, and lack of energetic and unified service in pursuit of peace and justice. We concluded last year's report by saying that we were committed to "uplifting the sense of Spirit we experience in our Meeting, facing our concerns about our Meeting's condition, and exploring creative ideas to invigorate Spirit-led service beyond our doors." We are thrilled to report this year that love abounds and we are responding to the challenges we identified last year.

Described below are various facets of Homewood Friends Meeting. Statements in *italics* are direct quotes from participants at our specially called meeting.

Worship

"During worship, the silence is rich, and those who speak from the silence have messages that clearly come from the silence ... and speak to other people." "Much of ministry arises from a gathered silence and not from a chatter of opinions." "It feels like the Spirit is really moving among and through us." One new young adult attender said, *"One of the reasons I keep coming back is that I feel like this is a place where I am free to find my own path to find the Inner Light within me and see it in others. The emphasis is on welcoming people, doing good works and living as Christ lived and doing what he would do in the flesh here."*

In 2015, average attendance at meeting was ~34, up slightly from last year. Our worship is nourished and supported by a thriving adult education program. In September 2015, we embarked on a year-long monthly discussion of Doug Gwyn's

A Sustainable Life. Committee-led adult-education sessions are being offered once a month as well, so that adult education precedes meeting for worship two first days of the month. In addition, last year we offered two well attended programs of weekly Experiment with Light meditation (a guided meditation developed by Rex Ambler that is thought to evoke the worship experience of early Friends), and a less well attended 4-session Introduction to Quakerism.

Community

"It feels like home to me." A Friend recently returning to Homewood said, "There is a lot more love. There are hugs. We have these newcomers who are staying. " "As a new attender I am aware and appreciative of a sense of community here." "As another newcomer I have been overwhelmed by the welcome, the mutual respect and the touching kindness that people show to each other and to me. I am deeply grateful."

Friends experience a strong sense of community at Homewood. We continue, with loving support from the Hospitality Committee, to provide each week a simple lunch following worship, allowing Friends extended time for fellowship and a chance to make a contribution to an organization chosen by Homewood members of the Baltimore Quaker Peace and Justice Committee. And thanks to a dedicated organizer and a rotating group of greeters, worshipers are consistently greeted each First Day.

Our Ministry and Counsel Committee recently reported to our business meeting that we could do a better job helping Friends with personal needs. We are exploring a new model of supporting Friends in need by relying on volunteers from the whole meeting rather than solely on our small Ministry and Counsel Committee.

Children

We have a very strong nursery program with a longtime staff member who provides a loving and creative space for our youngest children. Our First Day School, however, is very small, with approximately 2-5 children participating each week. This year we took a big step and hired a First Day School teacher to teach two Sundays a month. She is a young adult Friend who grew up in Baltimore Yearly Meeting, and she is doing a wonderful job. Our children's strongest message to us was, *"We need more children!"* The children enjoy coming to First Day School but *"sitting for long periods is very difficult."*

One adult who has long served the children of our meeting commented: *"This is mostly a grown-up meeting; there are very few children. Most of the conversations are grown-up conversations. [At lunch, the] children are at the children's table. We could benefit from engaging children in the conversation."*

Business

Our meetings for business are conducted monthly in a spirit of love and respect for each other. Average attendance is ~19. We have continued to streamline our process, with our Administrative Committee (all committee clerks and officers) meeting every other month rather than monthly.

Our Nominating Committee is carefully discerning needs of committees and identifying individuals with the skills and talents that match those needs. It remains a struggle to fill some committee assignments. On the other hand, we find meeting-approved working groups, which are time delimited and have more narrow foci than standing committees, an energizing way to meet some goals. This year we also agreed to and completed a long-sought, simple kitchen renovation.

Work in the World

It is impossible to speak of Baltimore in 2015 without remembering the significance of the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody and the outpouring of pain, fear, anger and frustration that followed. The Friday after the April 27th uprising, Baltimore Quakers gathered for our weekly peace vigil holding signs: "**WHEN BLACK LIVES MATTER** / Then All Lives Matter" in front of our Meeting House. We were grateful for the supportive attendance of our Baltimore Yearly Meeting Clerk and General Secretary that night. We have continued with Black Lives Matter vigils every Friday since, and we now have an explanatory flier on racial justice and Quakers to distribute as vigilers stand at a busy intersection of Charles Street.

Homewood participates in a joint committee with Stony Run, the Baltimore Quaker Peace and Justice Committee. This year we were excited to strengthen the Homewood portion of that committee with 4 new members. Several Homewood Friends are also participating in "Court Watch" -Friday afternoon visits to Baltimore City court rooms to bear witness.

We have a new Green Organizing Action Team (GOAT) working group. An energetic group of five members is working on a plan for Homewood to continue greening our building and is helping support individual actions and organize local political action to protect our planet.

This year our Trustees largely succeeded in divesting from investments in fossil fuels!

Outreach

Our Website is increasingly a source of ready information and updates, thanks to two cyber-sophisticated Friends. It is both a better tool for outreach and more helpful to members and regular attenders. In addition to our printed and digital announcements and newsletter, we now have a prominently displayed poster in the meetinghouse that reminds Friends of the month's events.

We have had a few more young adult attenders in recent months and are seeking ways to invite them into the life of the community. We need to continue to strive to improve our outreach. *“At our business meeting the other day I noticed that almost all of us are over 50 and many over age 60. We have a hard time keeping our children.”* We have attracted very few young families with children in recent years. And while we have some socioeconomic diversity, we have little racial or ethnic diversity.

Conclusion

Each week at the beginning of worship we read a statement that reminds us about what Meeting for Worship is all about.

The Quaker experience is that each of us has a measure of that radically loving spirit which guides us to live justly and peaceably. In worship, we enter into stillness of body and mind in order to feel that spirit of love within and among us, to give ourselves over to it, and to discern what it would have us do.

Indeed, divine Light and Love is moving within us and among us and changing us. We feel more connected, that our meeting is a more loving home. We are slowly starting to grow for the first time in years! However, we still struggle to muster the people power to smoothly accomplish the tasks needed to sustain a vibrant and connected meeting. We have made great strides in strengthening our religious education program for children. Now we need to attract young families and a more diverse group reflective of Baltimore’s population. We need to find ways to incorporate our young adult attenders into the life of the meeting. We are starting to coalesce in outward support of peace and justice. However, some of us continue to long for more clear, focused action in support of our broken Baltimore. It is important to remember in our outreach that *“we as Friends have something distinct to offer, to generate hope in the world.”*