Midlothian Friends Meeting

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report – 2022

Midlothian Friends Meeting is located in greater Richmond, VA, the former capital of the Confederacy, so we are reminded daily of the horrific history of systemic racism and the legacy of slavery in this country. As a Quaker meeting, we are constantly looking for ways to educate ourselves and others regarding the racism that still exists in ourselves and the world.

A good example is our Racial Justice Study Group, which meets monthly and consistently attracts 8 to 12 participants. This group allows us a deeper understanding of the issue of racism and how we can bring compassion and understanding to this divisive and pervasive issue. We strongly feel it is incumbent on white people to educate themselves regarding the black spirit.

In addition to studying literature on racism and its effects, the group sponsored a visit to the local "Slave Trail." This trail is a contextualized look at the route newly arrived slaves were forced to take, while in chains, to the local slave auction house. Plaques along the way provide details of the history of slavery in Richmond and the terrible conditions slaves experienced on the way to the New World and in their new life as chattel. Group participants found this experience difficult but eye-opening.

Some Friends visited and donated to the Black History Museum of Richmond, which provides educational resources and services to promote understanding of the history and culture of African Americans in Virginia.

The Racial Justice Study Group also invited a minister of a local black church to visit with us and provide his perspective on the issue of racism and how it has affected him and his congregation. Our intention was to have this become a regular event, but Covid interfered. However, we plan to follow up soon in the hope of resuming these visits.

Racism is a complex issue, but the Racial Justice Study group helps us to be grounded by bringing love to the discussion. Friends say it has brought a new awakening and gift of awareness. It has helped to soften our level of judgment of other people and to have compassion. We are deeply grateful for the chance to learn more and do more. But this is an ongoing process.

An African American Friend who was writing a book on the history of Quakers and the Black experience began attending our meeting a few years ago. She noted the lack of African American literature in our library. We acknowledged this shortcoming and began adding books on African American Quakers and other ethnicities. We included pictures and descriptions of Black Quakers in our library's history exhibits along with descriptions of how African Americans and women have been adversely affected by white males. One African American visitor commented favorably on a picture of Bayard Rustin (an African American Quaker and leader in the fight for civil rights) on our library wall. We have also added literature regarding Benjamin Lay, an early Quaker who was physically disabled yet spoke out loudly against slavery in both words and action.

Our quality of worship continues to be nurturing and welcoming. At our Meetings for Discernment (our name for Meeting for Business), our clerk encourages silence during the time between messages to allow the inner voice to guide us. We emphasize the importance of silence in general. That is where

Spirit lurks. That is where the still, small voice is heard. It is not so much what we discuss but how we remain open and respectful of one other.

Quaker worship is a time to practice quietness and the desire of the heart to connect with loving energy. It is an opportunity to turn within and find a way to connect with others. Quaker worship allows a space in which we can listen to a higher power and then share it with the world. It is a place where we can meet and support each other where we are. We practice oneness and sameness when we come to meeting, and this practice then becomes our lives. By living in and for the Spirit, our meeting provides strength through its cyclical giving and receiving. We may be lacking in some ways, but we still move forward by being in community.

Recently our Peace and Social Action Committee has been discerning what kind of stance we should take regarding reproductive rights. Discernment has been one of thoughtful contemplation and working through the Spirit. Quaker process is important in maintaining a slow, deliberative approach to decision making. This process underlies most of our decisions, whether in committees or in our Meetings for Discernment.

However, there is always room for improvement, and we are considering whether to create a Committee for Spiritual Nurture to help us in this effort. We have found it difficult to maintain a consistent sense of spirituality in our Meetings for Discernment because we must often jump from spiritual issues to those that are mundane, such as building maintenance. One Friend said this reminded her of a sign she saw along the highway: "Beanie Babies, Phone Cards, Spiritual Guidance."

One suggestion is that we experiment by reserving some Meetings for Discernment to discuss only spiritual matters. Spiritual issues require a different type of discernment, and silence produces a deeper realization of what is important. A spiritual nurture committee with a wide variety of people would help us do a better job of discerning subjects that truly require extensive discussion versus those that don't. The Quaker process is important but is not needed for every discussion.

We are a small meeting, but this has its advantages. We share a sense of spiritual intimacy and are able to know each other well. We care for each other. We listen to each other closely and act on what we learn. We don't often delegate. When there is a need, Midlothian Friends want to help. (For example, we have long provided transportation for those unable to drive). We communicate regularly through emails, meetings, and phone calls.

Our greatest strength is that we accept people exactly as they are.

If we were to describe ourselves on a sign in front of our meetinghouse, it would include one or more of the following:

- Come As You Are
- Peace To All Who Enter Here
- All Are Welcome
- Come, Fixed Or Broken
- Be Still And Know God
- Light Over Darkness
- SPICES: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, Stewardship

Because of our small size, though, there are few Friends available to do the tasks that keep us alive as a spiritual community. Many times, the same people seem to do most of the work, and we find ourselves "on the edge" getting things done. A lot of energy is needed to perform physical tasks such as cleaning the kitchen and bathrooms, and this can leave less time and energy for spiritual pursuits. If we aren't conscious of this, we may be distracted from our larger mission. Maybe keeping things bare bones will allow us more time to focus on the Spirit.

We strongly believe in the importance of maintaining a sense of the gathered meeting, but this is difficult while using Zoom. Though we still use Zoom, most Friends now worship in person.

We want to attract people, but we may worry about this too much. However long a person attends, they are a part of us, and we embrace them. Many people come for short periods of time. We may not be what they are looking for, but we may have helped them in their spiritual journey (and that is ok). Our Memorial Garden and meetinghouse grounds are open to everyone, whether they are part of our meeting or not. But we still question why we are not attracting younger people, families, and different ethnic groups.

We acknowledge that Quaker worship can be difficult and is not for everyone. In particular, our Meeting for Discernment can sometimes be described as "the war of the Lamb." Silent worship may be hard because no one is digesting spirituality for you. Also, there are now lots of opportunities for silent contemplation away from Quaker meetings. And people may just be too busy to allot time for Quaker worship every week. Though Quakers usually do not proselytize, we should think of methods of outreach that will get our message across. One Friend recommended "Thee Quaker," a project founded by Jon Watts to communicate Quaker stories to the online community. This might be something for us to consider as we develop ideas for outreach.

Being a Quaker is hard work, and it is important to recognize that someone coming to meeting may feel discomfort as well as warmth. The main thing is that they feel welcome, which is why they come to meeting in the first place.

As we face the challenges and joys to come, we will continue to do so with love and empathy, welcoming everyone and encouraging them to take part in making decisions. Quaker activism is vital, and our Racial Justice Study Group and Peace and Social Action Committee are engaged on many levels, as is the meeting as a whole. Though any Quaker meeting has its ups and downs, we hope the example of love Midlothian Friends exhibit and the activism we advocate will live on in the hearts, souls, and lives of those we touch.