Midlothian Friends Meeting

2024 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

At Midlothian Friends Meeting, we experience many ways to deepen relationships with Spirit and with each other. The programs of our Spiritual Nurture Committee and the topics discussed during our weekly Circle of Friends provide us with fresh perspectives that enhance our understanding of Spirit and how Spirit affects our lives. Our beautiful Meetinghouse and grounds allow us to appreciate the beauty and hallowedness of nature, which is the Spirit all around us. And many Friends experience Spirit simply through the deep, meaningful silence of worship.

The wider Quaker community is important to us. We feel closer to Baltimor Yearly Meeting (BYM) now. The use of technology such as Zoom, which we began using during the Covid-19 pandemic, has provided more opportunities to become connected. Also, two Friends went to Yearly Meeting this year and were able to give us reports of their experiences there. And our Peace and Social Action Committee has been helping to keep us informed about social and political issues.

A first-time attender shared that his father once told him “change the man, change the family, change the nation, change the world”. Volunteer programs help us reach out to other Friends and neighbors. Having integrity and showing kindness and love individually and collectively-has a major impact in the world at large.

During this past year, we have had many opportunities to see Spirit at work. One of our members has provided legal representation through the Sacred Heart Center, a Catholic non-profit, for migrants from Central America and Afghanistan. Through him our meeting has provided asylum claim financial assistance for this work from our charity called Friend$hare.

A recent memorial service for Cate Grove, a deeply loved Friend and one of the “founders” of our Meeting, was filled with people whose heartfelt testimonies showed how much she touched their lives, and how even seemingly little displays of kindness can have lasting effects.

In October, our Racial Justice Study Group sponsored a presentation on structural racism by Ben Campbell. Attendees included members of Midlothian Friends, Richmond Friends Meeting, Richmond Hill, the Episcopal diocese, and the Coalition of Powhatan Churches. This event was preceded by a Quakerism 101 session on racism. We were also a Community Partner in the annual *Run Richmond 16.19* that celebrates unity in diversity.

Our Racial Justice Study Group helps us to speak openly and learn about racial justice issues through inspirational readings, field trips, and other events such as the Ben Campbell presentation. About eight regular monthly attenders examine the sources of historical prejudice to reach a new understanding in humility with our friends and neighbors. Participants say it has been a powerful personal growth experience. Through this group, we learn where, how, and why we fall short so we can improve and move forward.

Seeing that of God in everyone is at the heart of our focus on community. It is not always easy, but it is essential. We believe that if we see God in others and act accordingly, maybe they will see God in us and carry it forward.

We face some significant challenges, though. Many Friends are older, and some have faced sickness and disability. These “elder Lions” are struggling and often unable to participate as they once did. One of our most faithful and steadfast Friends is ill and not able to do many of the

tasks that kept us going. But we have seen Spirit blossom as others have stepped up to do what needs to be done. One of our members has been active in the BYM End of Life Working Group and has led Quakerism 101 sessions on related topics. We realize that we are a community in which each of us has something valuable to offer.

Our spiritual strength is being tested. More of us are struggling with the vicissitudes of life. We need to re-examine what this Meeting means to us and plan the next phase. We must try to reach others who may not even have shown up yet in the hope this will result in a raising up of the Spirit that will help our Meeting thrive.

Another challenge is our Religious Education (RE) program for families and young Friends. Our RE teacher is currently on sabbatical, and we have not yet determined a way forward. This is a major priority for us.

We have different challenges from those of other churches, since speaking out of silence is our way of worship. Some people come to Meeting because they enjoy the silence but may not understand "vocal ministry" or our testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and stewardship (SPICES) etc. We recently experienced some misunderstandings about our vocal ministry, and our Spiritual Nurture Committee created a Quakerism 101 session to address this issue. Vocal leadings have since improved, as Friends understand they need to let Spirit guide them. By gaining more experience in silence, we sharpen and shape our sense of when and how to share out of the silence and to appreciate the sharing of others.

"Eldering" is a term we don't often use, since it may mean different things to different people. For us, leading by example is the most effective kind of "eldering". Let your life be your example. Someone is always watching and will be impressed mostly by what you do, not what you say. One Friend shared his nieces' comments from his brother's recent funeral: "Dad didn't tell us what to do, he showed us." To elder is not about age. We are all ministers to each other. We learn from everyone, regardless of age.

Many principles of Quaker thought and practice (peace, simplicity, nonviolence, etc.) are being eroded in the world. Regional and national Quaker groups can be both inward- and outward-facing, but, now more than ever, we must be outward-facing and share Quaker responses to world issues. We can reach out through the radio, our website, social media, community events, and other methods to reach a wider audience.

Similarly, vocal ministry occurs not only during worship. It also includes how we express ourselves to the world at large in words and by example. We've opened our Meeting House to a local Buddhist group. Our letters in support of the people of Gaza, our active involvement in the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP) at their Day for All People, our work with the Virginia General Assembly, and our involvement in social justice are all ways we speak truth to power. We also shared our new logo at *Run Richmond 16.19* as a way of becoming more visible in the community. And the Thrifty Quaker, a thrift store founded by and connected to our Meeting donated more than $60,000 from net provides to over three dozen charities this past year. This work is a continuing example of Spirit at work in the community.

We don't back off from exploring the application of our testimonies but acknowledge there are no easy answers. We have an openness that strengthens us and includes all our voices, hopes, and doubts. An example of this is a worship sharing session last November that helped us better understand our Peace Testimony and how it applies to the world.

Humility is sometimes difficult (e.g. finding that of God in bigots). It requires strength and backbone. We are called to be understanding when we might want to express outrage. We admit we are not always sure where to go with this.

We can learn much from Gandhi's teachings on humility. He taught that leading by example and doing the right thing are among the best methods to effect change. He once said that "you don't teach people not to litter, you pick up the litter yourself. Even if you don't get through to them, you have still picked up their litter." We need to approach every situation with humility and service.

Some people have used the word "deplorables" to characterize those with whom they disagree. There is a Zen saying that "Every fool is a clever man in disguise," meaning there is goodness in everyone even when not apparent. We should refrain from language that is divisive, and we make a sincere effort to do that.

Nonetheless, many in our Meeting simply do not understand where people today are coming from. Why is inclusivity considered a bad thing? We feel that if we could gain a better understanding, we might be able to see a way forward. Without this, we may unfairly lump together everyone with whom we disagree.

We acknowledge that it is hard to think ahead because of the outrage and insecurity we feel about the political situation. We feel powerless at times because no one seems to be doing anything to oppose what is happening. We must strongly express our opposition but must do so without making personal attacks. This, too, is difficult. This goes beyond politics with us. We must take the moral high ground and speak out for our Quaker values (SPICES) in a way that will be heard. This is not just about humility, either. We need to speak out for those who can't speak for themselves. We need to focus on what is within our power and on those organization(s) we can partner with. The current situation must not stand.

Quakers have a spiritual heritage of fighting for what is right and just. We take heart by looking back at examples of strength and determination, such as Alice Paul and Susan B. Anthony. These were people who clearly stood up for and acted on their beliefs.

As a community of Friends, we are called to rise above pettiness and to choose love instead of fear. By turning within to find a quiet place regardless of outward events, we can "rest in Spirit" and face the next encounter, whatever it is, with a new focus and strength. Love is always the answer, but we must open space within to allow God to guide us.

In all we do, we need to remember that there are glimpses of the extraordinary in the ordinary. Heaven is here and now if we only look for it. Going for peace and love is about the present moment.