

Midlothian Friends Meeting

2019 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

Midlothian Friends Meeting has a culture of listening with open hearts and open minds, even if we're missing the point of someone's vocal ministry because their language or topic doesn't resonate with us. We haven't always been as open to differing perspectives and have worked hard to become less judgmental in everything we do. Now, if we are unable to see the value of another's vocal ministry or if we feel the need to judge it, we back up and ask ourselves why. Reflecting on the 'why' helps us to see more deeply and nonjudgmentally, experiencing spiritual insights we would not otherwise have had.

Vocal ministry at MFM is always about something that matters. Sharing out of the silence is sacred to us and we try not to use it as an opportunity merely to "chat".

We also seek to affirm each other's gifts, allowing individual Friends to take the initiative using their own gifts and vision to guide themselves and others. One Friend shared that she had always been looking for answers to why she is here, but with the encouragement and love she experiences at MFM, she came to the realization that she is here for God to use with her unique skills and gifts.

Spirit is palpable at MFM, even when traversing difficult situations. We practice deep listening, patience and nonjudgmental acceptance. We have been gentle and loving all our years together and have really grown in letting Spirit guide and then moving forward.

There have been many instances in our Meeting where the Spirit working within individual Friends and groups has led them to take action. For example, during the past year, MFM has engaged in a long process to discern whether and how to build a Memorial Garden on Meetinghouse grounds. This was a huge commitment for our Meeting. The process was 'rocky' and messy at times. But way opened and, through the beauty and simplicity of the discernment process, we saw how essential love and forgiveness (to ourselves and others) is to a project of this magnitude. MFM initially approved an amount of money for the Memorial Garden based on a limited knowledge of the resources that would be required. Surprisingly, though, the authorized expenditure turned out to be almost exactly the amount that was ultimately spent. This, despite the fact that the Memorial Garden Committee focused not so much on the budget as on what the Meeting discerned to be the way forward. Midlothian Friends persevered through the initial messiness to arrive at this "sweet coming-together" in the Spirit (and budget!).

One Friend who is relatively new to our Meeting expressed an interest in using innovative fun activities to convey Quaker testimonies (values) to children in the larger community. He was quickly supported in this effort, and a study group and non-profit corporation were created to make this vision a reality.

MFM provides the space and opportunity to practice spiritual work. We are mere humans in relationship who can grow spiritually in this place and extend it to the rest of our lives. As one Friend expressed it, "Somehow the light of the Meeting is greater than each of our individual selves put together." We measure our overall experience by how we feel in Meeting and what leadings and insights we discover there. We experience oneness and the ability to see beyond mere personalities. Each of us gets to meet herself or himself in others. What we experience is reflected back to us as a gift that helps us to grow in understanding, love, and self-forgiveness.

Another Friend described MFM as a star, her center, a foundation to help her self-judgment. In everything, Spirit works through and within us to increase our desire for oneness.

We are a community of kindred spirits in the desire for social action. We have answered the call for social action in several ways. One Friend put it succinctly: "It's amazing what you can do when you don't know what you can't do."

MFM has supported the "Thrifty Quaker" for more than 20 years. The 'TQ' is a thrift store that donates most of its sales receipts to a different charity each month.

MFM is part of the Central Virginia Sanctuary Network. Our Sanctuary Committee works in concert with this network to support immigrants' rights. Our Peace and Social Action Committee works alone and in combination with other groups, notably FCNL (Friends Committee for National Legislation) and VICPP (Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy), to lobby for state and legislative efforts that support Quaker values.

Our Environmental Group educates us on the effects of climate change and other environmental threats, and supports appropriate legislative efforts on behalf of the environment. MFM also supports a Book Group and a Men's Support Group (which is open to everyone, not just men). Both the Book and Men's Groups include participants from the outside community.

Our weekly discussion group, 'Circle of Friends', continues to thrive. 5 to 10 Friends meet regularly prior to Worship to discuss widely varying topics. Participants feel comfortable sharing insights and personal concerns in a relaxed, spiritual setting.

Our Religious Education teachers are especially close to our hearts. Our current teachers, Laura Clark and Olivia Duncan, both grew up within Midlothian Friends Meeting and continue to bless us with their contributions and commitment to our children. We are also very thankful for Katie DeWeerd Brown's years of dedicated teaching during which she drove many miles each Sunday to be with us.

Because we want all who wish to worship with us to be able to do so, we established transportation schedules for two Friends who are no longer able to drive. Volunteers drive them to and from Meeting each week according to an established schedule.

We give special thanks to a beautiful spirit among us, who reminded us of the importance of inclusivity in groups associated with MFM. Equality of all is an important Quaker value and no one should be excluded, intentionally or otherwise, from any group or activity associated with our Meeting. As fallible humans, we know that we don't always understand or notice the subtle ways Friends may feel excluded. Exclusivity can be subtle, and we must keep asking ourselves whether there is even one person who may feel left out. We acknowledge that this is an unresolved and ongoing leading among us. And we owe a debt of gratitude to the Friend who opened our eyes to this important issue.

MFM has evolved to become a space for compassion and open hearts, not relegating people to committees or similar constructs. There's minimal structure now, allowing spaces for each of us to be involved in her/his own way. We have found that forms are not necessary and are usually just used to institute control. Simplicity is our guide. Our culture of forgiveness, acceptance and love is to be contrasted with, for example, the corporate world's Total Quality Management (TQM), which is hierarchal in structure.

Knowing when Spirit moves you, the body will allow you to express yourself and attempt to communicate. As a faith community, we welcome the spontaneity and Spirit-led urgency of that communication. As we strive to be open to the Light, we try to avoid judging what is being said or conveying a feeling that the speaker has crossed some invisible, forbidden line. Keeping that space of acceptance open gives strength to the Meeting and makes ordinary moments become extraordinary.