

Palo Alto Friends Meeting
State of the Meeting Report 2014
Approved 4/13/2014

Like most Friends, we of Palo Alto Friends Meeting commonly use the term “community” but occasionally use “family” to refer to the members, attenders and others who are attached to our Meeting. In this family, some are old and some are young in “Quaker years”. In this Meeting family there are children who learn from us “parents” how to be adult Friends, as we learned from those who taught us. There are elders – remnants of an earlier generation - who no longer can serve as active workers, but who deserve our care and thanks for a job well done. And there are absent “children” – those who were literal children but (suddenly, it seems) grew up and left for college, and dear Friends who moved far away and now contribute to other Meeting families.

Discernment of our state of the Meeting began with queries at Meeting for Business, Jan 12, 2014, and later posted on flip charts, drawing more written comments. Emerging themes are:

Community

How are we caring for one another? We are given opportunities to practice the art of caring for the broken and vulnerable. The Bunny Incident is an example of our Meeting’s concern for our unhoused neighbors. The Hotel De Zink guests who stay December nights in our Meeting house showed us a box containing a pet rabbit, left in the foyer along with an anonymous note asking that the bunny be returned to its owner, without stating who the owner was. There was an outpouring of concern and flurry of activity for several days trying to find the owner and return the bunny. No owner coming forth, Buildings and Grounds Committee – in lieu of a committee specifically chartered to carry this concern – found a home for the bunny where it will replace another lost pet rabbit.

We customarily have a shared lunch once a month, with responsibility for preparing the food rotating among our standing committees. When no committee was able to do it one month, the lunch was cancelled. This caused a good deal of distress, teaching us that people count on these coming-together opportunities. Plans were made to continue having lunches as potlucks if no committee organizes them.

We held a threshing session on queries about community; a Friend noted that all twenty people who attended have had significant involvement, with little participation in the threshing session by newcomers. Some have expressed deep desire for more community, which includes accountability to the family and commitment to turning to the community for clearness when facing problems.

We are clearly not homogeneous. Some of us feel we are a lively, engaged, talkative group. Others find it difficult to talk with each other socially or seriously except in committee meetings. There are some people whose voices are stronger in a small group compared to speaking in Meeting for Worship. To better get to know each other, we have begun a series of “Sharing our Lives” potlucks, where two Friends of different ages in Quaker years are interviewed about their lives and journeys.

Our work within the Meeting

As in most human families, those who are content with things as they are say little, and those who are discontent say much. Part of our discipline of caring for each other is to discern causes of

discontent; these range from personal issues projected as flaws in the community to issues of community dynamics of concern to many.

When there are no complaints, it is easy to take for granted work that is going well. We have able Friends serving on Worship & Ministry and Care & Concerns committees. So also First Day School, which serves children in a range of ages, many of whom will be teens next year. So also Adult Education, whose study topics have included Quakerism, Islam and compassion. So also Buildings and Grounds, which has held work-days and collaborated with Nursery School on relandscaping the front of the property. Our IT Committee recently added wireless internet access (for a Meeting in Silicon Valley, a little delayed) and an online voicemail service.

We are looking at our committee structure and how we are (or are not) accomplishing our work, and what that work is or ought to be. This stems from chronic difficulty finding people to serve. Due to mobility, attrition and burn out, we depend on too few people. We examined the problem in a half-day threshing session to explore committee structure and purpose, finding more questions than answers. Are there too many committees? Is a committee the best way to address issues? Is it time to lay some committees down or merge them? Revise their charters?

Some people have a perception that there is a decision-making in-group, an opinion which suggests a need for greater transparency in how our Meeting's work is done. Committee work frustrates many: Is there too much discussion (often off topic) and not enough action? But committee work is also where "Spirit comes alive through the joy of getting stuff done together," in the words of one Friend.

Care & Concerns Committee (acting for all of us) is challenged to consider the kinds of help that Meeting is prepared and able to give community members in need. This is not easy. One Friend has said, "I often feel that my 'caring' is more superficial (help with an immediate problem but then we move on) than I would like it to be." The committee annually sends everyone in our directory a "warm shoulder letter" offering help if needed. In one case an attender who can no longer physically come to the Meeting House due to severe medical problems reached out to us for help. Our challenge in responding with love is that under her doctor's care she is participating in a research study which requires that no one hold her in the Light or pray for her in any way lest the energy interfere with the results of the study. It seems frustrating to some that we are prevented from giving the very kind of help we are constituted to give: spiritual support.

Action in a broken world

The many causes outside the Meeting in which members and attenders participate add to the vitality of the Meeting as a whole - in El Salvador, Palestine and Russia by raising money for scholarships, supporting rebuilding Palestinian homes in the West Bank, working with Alternatives to Violence in Russia, expanding conscientious objection outreach in Kazakhstan, providing a solar water pump in Haiti.

We raise money for FCL-CA at the annual Harvest Festival and occasional chamber music concerts. The tradition of the Harvest Festival strengthens us as a community, but we are examining ways to reduce the work required and make it more "harvesty" and fun. We could use people (both teens and non-teens) from other Meetings in the Yearly and Quarterly Meetings to work on the Harvest Festival (San José Meeting continues to do book sales, but others have dropped out). How can we mark the significance of the 50th anniversary of Harvest Festival in a couple of years?

Locally, we have devoted time and energy to issues of homelessness: continued hosting of the Hotel de Zink shelter, and in particular, improving the treatment of vehicle dwellers who have nowhere else to live. We considered participating in a proposed Palo Alto city government program to allow vehicle dwellers to use church parking lots. Our efforts included attending city council meetings and publishing an op-ed piece in a major newspaper. Among interested congregations, we were the only ones to reach out for input from neighbors, as well as the Friends Nursery School that shares our property. Listening to and weighing this feedback meant we decided not to participate at present. We now live with the question: Does this mean we have failed to serve the homeless? Or have we planted seeds among our neighbors to grow and bear fruit at a later time?

Peace & Social Action Committee is often stretched by the range and importance of issues brought to it for discernment. Having turned over arrangements for Hotel de Zink to a standing committee, our small Community Service Committee is seeking new purpose. It has been several years since we have had a functioning Unity with Nature Committee to carry our concern for the natural world and the proper place of humankind in it.

Identity

By continuing to engage in the Quaker Quest program begun last year, we are seeking ways to more effectively share our beliefs within our family – where beliefs are not defined theologically, but as faith in the relevance of Friends’ testimonies and practices in the modern world – and spread word of what Friends have to offer to the world outside the Quaker family. Our Meeting is well aware of the diversity of our theological outlooks – listening to one another beyond the words, in a spirit of tenderness – but not always. In recognition of our diversity, we selected as the theme of our spring retreat “The Kaleidoscope of Community.”

We were reminded of our historical identity by a reunion held in our Meetinghouse of families who had lived in the Lawrence Lane housing tract abutting our property in the 1950's and 60's. The Lawrence tract was an intentional multiracial community with minimum quotas for various ethnic groups - the exact opposite of the exclusive racial covenants that were still legal in property deeds at the time. There was a close affinity between residents of the tract and our Meeting, and some of our own members lived there.

Regarding our place in the wider Quaker family, we have an increased appreciation of *Western Friend* magazine with the awareness that its current editor is a member of our Meeting.

Where does Spirit come alive?

We asked ourselves the query: “Where does Spirit come alive for you in our community?” For all the concern that our committee structure needs improvement, a frequent answer was “Service on committees has spiritual rewards.” Other responses were: “Spirit sometimes comes alive in worship – but not always,” and “...when we gather to consider a single subject thoughtfully,” as in the threshing session on committees and in Quaker Quest working group meetings.

Many find the Spirit embodied in celebration. We can celebrate what we have achieved with the Harvest Festival – celebrate that we have contributed to a good cause. We can celebrate people being willing to do things for others in and outside our family. We can celebrate being non-judgmental and forgiving towards everyone. We can even celebrate not being perfect in any of these.