

Toronto Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends Report on the State of Society for 2019

*The Meeting Community is that place where each of us is supported in the life of the Spirit. More than a place or a group of people, it is a state of possibility and an experience of community that underlies our religious life together.*¹

There were more younger members and attenders than usual at our worship-sharing session on the State of Society. The liveliness and thoughtfulness of their contributions clarified our knowledge of the vital need to share Quaker values across generations. All spoke to the importance of our shared spiritual life, and the crying need for spiritual values in an increasingly secular wider world. One Young Friend spoke of Friends House as the pillar of her life. The importance of our meeting community in fostering these values came through loud and clear in every aspect of our discussions.

Discussion of the nuts and bolts structure of our Monthly Meeting focussed on the importance of Young Friends and Friends House in maintaining a place where our spiritual lives are supported and encouraged. A TMM Committee Fair invited participation in the work of our committees. Toronto Meeting has a strong foundation in the hard work done by its standing committees, the trustees, and the members of our staff. The reality of current legal requirements and the work of the Sexual Abuse and Harassment Committee have led us to undertake legal preparations for incorporation. Advances in communication have led to an effort to improve technology and processes for TMM, and the use of Twitter to improve intergenerational communication.

Such work might not be seen as spiritual, but within Friends House our spiritual values find a base for its physical existence that allows the spirit to flourish in our Meeting and in the wider community. Moreover, such work is performed as service that supports our deep recognition of the Light within us all. We benefit from the loving maintenance of the beautiful Meeting Room and the building itself. We are striving to develop a meaningful acknowledgement of the land on which Friends House stands and the nations who lived here before us.

An increase in spiritual sharing could help us all, but is especially important for younger members who seek spiritual support. In today's society many young people have little time, and they lack the ongoing employment and sustained support that previous generations could rely upon. In our meeting community they might hope to learn about strongly held spiritual values as they come to know older Friends. More intergenerational opportunities for learning from each other will help the spiritual growth of us all.

¹ "Introduction" to chapter 3, "The Meeting Community, p. 70, in *Canadian Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice*

Suggestions include mentoring positions for Young Friends on our committees, and we might organize spiritually-oriented talks after Meeting for Worship. A recent meeting about silence, facilitated by a younger member, contributed to the greater wellbeing of all. At a time when many of us are aging, younger members seek a closer mentoring relationship with older Friends. We need to learn what they wish for and discover how it can be provided.

The Community Nights, held once a month with a potluck supper, cooperative board games, and other activities, have enlarged our intergenerational community. Our Children's Program, which meets on Sunday mornings, is supported by the Young Friends Program Committee and a paid staff member, allowing parents to attend Meeting for Worship. We share our delight when the children join our shared worship for the last few minutes. Even younger members are learning Quaker values and traditions, and we enjoy shaking hands with each other!

Expanding the Visiting Committee might help us to extend our sense of community, individual to individual. The size of the city and the busyness of our members often distracts us from sharing time with one another, as we focus much of our attention on committee work and minute writing. Could we lay down some committees and procedures to make time for the pleasure of company we are often too busy to share.

Attendance at Sunday Meeting for Worship has recently increased, yet many of these Seekers fail to return. Why? Undoubtedly our silence does not appeal to all, even among Friends. We could consider other ways to draw in newcomers. New attenders may be seeking spiritual companionship, and while a spiritual way of life can be found through committee work, this is certainly not obvious at first glance. Perhaps we should post a notice on the Meeting Room door reading "Caution! Being here may change you."

While numbers are only one of our concerns, our continuation as a Monthly Meeting requires support from many. The importance of spirituality in our lives is reflected by the use of Friends House for a wide variety of community groups and activities. Do the people who come to events at the House realise why we support them? Could we find a new way to help them, some of whom are young, to understand Friends values and testimonies? Canadian Quakers no longer proselytise as they did in Fox's day, but there are ways of linking the secular and spiritual that we have failed to share. A highly successful Quaker Quest meeting some years ago had no follow-up.

We are aware of our lack of diversity. Our history of openness to gender diversity should lead to increased participation by the LGBTQ+ community, but we remain largely white in a city of increasing racial diversity. How can we change this? We need to expand our community, but it seems we are not good at offering spiritual sharing to each other and to the wider community of Toronto.

TMM has joined the Coalition of Queering Christian Voices.² There is also a Bible study group, and monthly meetings for singing. Further sessions on Quaker practice will supplement those already underway on Quaker history. Those seeking inner and outer peace share concerns about poverty, homelessness, and peace.

We have temporarily laid down the Peace and Social Action Committee, but individual friends continue many of these activities. Our Statement on Social Justice requires meaningful follow-up, but we have welcomed our third sponsored refugee family. Friends and attenders are involved in global issues. TMM participated in Climate Action Week and Friends were involved in other climate-related events that drew young people to meetings held at Friends House. The Kitchen Table Climate Conversation project has also brought Seekers, enhancing outreach to a wider church community through KAIROS.

Midweek Meeting for Worship and Worship Groups

Midweek Meeting for Worship is held at Friends House on Wednesday evenings. A period of about 45 minutes of silent worship is followed by a sharing of “afterthoughts” amongst some four to eleven attenders, answering to varying pronouns, whose increasing mutual trust is leading to a shared ownership of the Meeting. There is a lot of love there. This small and less formal gathering is a good introduction to our Sunday Meeting for Worship, which some also now attend.

The **Downtown Worship Group** has met sporadically on the second Wednesday of the month at 2:00 pm in Friends House. Because the group is aging, ill health continues to cause cancellations. Although only three regular members of the original larger group remain, our meetings have provided important spiritual support that has been an ongoing source of comfort and sustenance to us all, and we wish to continue. We value the time we are able to spend together in shared worship, discussion, and tender concern for one another.

The **West End Worship Group** meets in members' homes on the first Sunday of the month. Meetings are often silent, with time afterwards sharing events of the past month - joys and sorrows. Social time over light refreshments allows us to deepen friendships and to discuss Quakerly concerns.

² This group was formerly known as the National Consultation on Affirming Ministries.