

Tampa Monthly Meeting Spiritual State of the Meeting Report 2022

The Tampa Friends Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends met on 4 Twelfth Month 2022 to discern the Spiritual State of the Meeting (SSOM). The following queries from Southeastern Yearly Meeting were used as a starting point for this discernment:

- How has the Spirit been at work in the meeting?
- Has there been a deepening and strengthening of the sense of the Divine Presence in our midst during the past year? Do we feel a sense of our individual spirits fusing into an undivided group as we worship? Do we leave our meetings filled with a sense of love and peace and courage to meet the challenge of Spirit filled living?
- Do you have other reflections on the current condition of the meeting—places where you see new life emerging or loss or sadness that you want to share?

During the early part of this past year, Friends felt like Tampa Meeting was disjointed and scraping by as we still dealt with the effects of the COVID pandemic. Though we had been holding worship in a hybrid format with people at the meetinghouse and on Zoom, high case numbers again caused us to go completely online to start the year. This also postponed a community potluck planned for January 1 (but held later in the spring on the meetinghouse grounds). Just as we were figuring out how to interact, it seemed we would hit another bump in the road. As case numbers lowered, we again returned to the meetinghouse with an online meeting option. Over the next few months we added back after-meeting fellowship time and potlucks. In November, we held our traditional after-Thanksgiving friendly dinner: one of the first times we had a friendly dinner in someone's home in more than two years. Friends report that this year felt more like a return to normalcy.

Some Friends also mentioned the overall loss we as a meeting have faced the past couple of years. Friends who had died more recently and even several years before COVID were on our minds; one Friend recognized that perhaps we had not fully processed the losses we have faced: the Friends who have died, the Friends who have moved, and all the changes as a result of COVID. One Friend reminded us that those who came before us have shown us that we have the human capacity to live into our Quaker values. Those who came before us have shown us the way and we can feel it, knowing the Light isn't simply in our head but in our heart and is visceral. Others were reminded of the models of Quaker spirituality those who came before us shared. We remembered how they worked with the children of the meeting and how they taught us about kindness and warm affection.

A consistent theme of the discernment was that our worship has deepened this year. One Friend told a story about missing Meeting for Worship once this year and feeling empty; this was an emotional situation that she had not felt so deeply in her 45 years as a Quaker. This was a powerful lesson for her that taught her how important communal worship is and spoke strongly to her of the Spirit in Tampa Meeting. Others felt that as we nurtured the community, worship was more meaningful and the Divine Presence was more apparent. Another Friend felt like he captured a

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deeper understanding of worship and spoken messages; he felt more connected because of the Spirit in Meeting for Worship and felt alive and better every week after meeting.

This year's discernment seemed different from the discernments before COVID affected us so deeply. Previously, the focus had been on what occurred in the past year and how we processed those things. However, for this discernment, there was a strong focus on moving forward and how we hope to be effective in the coming years. Several Friends spoke passionately about where we are headed as a meeting. Rather than simply reflecting on what had happened, it was a compelling call to live out our Quaker Faith.

One Friend felt the swirling outside world had affected us individually and caused us to bring that unmoored vibe to meeting. We are called to seek way forward as individuals and relearn what it means to be in community. She asked us to be intentional, deciding who we want to be in ten years and bringing that vision to fruition. To discover this vision, we should not simply give advice but rather say, "here's what we've learned from our experience, but a new generation's experience will make those hard decisions to move forward." To stay on track, core spiritual values will be needed: patience, self-discipline, welcoming, nurturing, listening, mutual aid, defending those groups who are mistreated, and principles of nonviolence.

Friends also spoke about needing more opportunities to share within Tampa Meeting about peace and social concern activities in the greater world. These activities give us hope and energy, and we should be talking about them more. These activities come from our Quaker witness and can inspire us to do more as a meeting. Other Friends connected this service with outreach for the meeting: our service in the world helps others to see who we are and what we are doing. We recognize that people are attracted to the Quaker way. There are plenty of people who could benefit from what we offer and they would bring their gifts and energy to us. In service, we can connect with anyone and everyone; the spiritual foundation and outreach we want lie in the path of service.

Though we had a set aside time for SSOM discernment, the queries were referenced throughout worship, numerous vocal messages, joys and concerns, and the actual discernment on this first day. During joys and concerns, one member told about three handmade quilts she had made and donated to the meeting over the past two years. Though we had seen the quilts, she waited until this day to share the full spiritual story behind their creation. The first quilt is separated blocks, representing the separation we experienced when COVID first happened in 2020 - yet the quilt also captures how we tried to stay connected with online worship. The second quilt came a few months later and is a series of arrows, indicating that we were starting to flow in the same direction. The final quilt still depicts the individuals at meeting but in a much more unified, solid foundation showing that we were headed towards a place of strength again.

The pandemic continues to challenge and change us, yet we find the bedrock values of Quakerism to give us hope.