

TAMPA MONTHLY MEETING SPIRITUAL STATE OF THE MEETING REPORT 2012

Our Spiritual State of the Meeting report arose from a discernment in which we were asked to consider how Spirit has moved among us in the past year, both as a Meeting and as individuals. This report tries to faithfully record both our current understanding as well as the questions that underlie our continuing journey as a community of seekers.

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 our meetings for worship with a concern for business lead to a corporate search for and revelation of God's truth? Do we leave our Meeting filled with a sense of love and peace and courage to meet the challenge of Spirit filled living?

Friends voiced concerns regarding the corporate worship – “somewhat scattered rather than gathered” – the hope being toward realizing the potential for a more gathered meeting. An observation was made that any lack of depth might sometimes originate with what was brought to Meeting in the way of personal concerns, stresses, situations. It was noted that there was a real need, want, and effort being made toward more depth and strength of the Divine Presence in addition to a heightened awareness of Spirit working amongst us.

Regarding the fusing of individual spirits into one, some felt they experienced it at times but wish it happened more often. The idea of corporate worship is new to some and the experience of it not clear to all; this forms a body of individuals sometimes focusing too much on self rather than giving over to the expectant waiting of the group. Meetings for worship with a concern for business were seen this year as somehow lacking in weight – not much of consequence was considered in these Meetings. This was primarily a reflection of the state of energy of the members of the Meeting, this year having been filled with many challenges for several individuals. Still, there has been a greater sense of truly listening to the wisdom of others even if topics of discussion are mundane. This listening spirit has included less side conversation or talking over one another during the meeting for business. There is more trust in the committees and their discernment – allowing the Spirit to work through them; we are doing what is needed and doing it the best we can.

Without question, yes, Meeting for Worship leads to a sense of love and peace – those who struggle with even coming to Meeting find that they indeed made the right choice to come because without fail the week is more approachable after having attended. One Friend found it “difficult to be courageous when they are in pain” but “shudders to think where I would be if I had to deal with this past year on my own.”

Do we find our vocal ministry Spirit led?

We continue to struggle with the definition of “Spirit-led”. There is a dichotomy between messages focusing on personal thoughts and feelings about things and messages based in the Spirit speaking through the person to the group. There was the recognition that one cannot really know what is leading another to speak and so we try to assume that they are. We try to hear the Truth even if it comes out awkwardly. We trust that the messages are ‘tested’ by the vocal minister before speaking. They may not be a message on a “small lightning bolt from the Divine” but they are still from God. Most messages shared are not just opinions of the day nor criticisms. “Non-Spirit-led” messages or those that are given outside of a leading tend to come from visitors or those new to Friends’ ways. Despite any of these, the Meeting can be anchored by the weight of the body when the body has weight.

How do we support each other as members of this beloved community?

There has been deep support of members this year, especially those who have faced great personal challenges. Some of this support has come as a body but much of it has come from individuals in the Meeting. We have done everything as best we can with as much commitment as we can bring to bear. The support tends to be organic – perhaps even “Spirit-led” – rather than directed; this care is recognized as a responsibility. One Friend stated that she felt enormous support from Friends who genuinely care about her and she in turn supports others by putting concerns into words and holding Friends in the Light.

Are all of our members and regular attenders engaged in the work of the Meeting according to their gifts and capabilities?

Friends have been engaged as they can within their abilities and as their situations allow. Financial support of Meeting is not as broadly shared as it might be but this too depends on each person's capability to contribute and must be personally discerned. There is a recognition that a small group does a great deal of the work. It was advised that we need to do a better job at inviting people to get involved and be on committees. The same stresses and challenges spoken to previously affect Friends' abilities in this as well.

What was our Meeting's witness in the wider community in the last year?

For the most part, our energies this year have been spent on care for each other rather than on big projects. That being said, we were able to:

- Through the work of a teacher, initiate a book drive and program to provide books and activities for children in underprivileged situations

- Adopt a Family for Christmas

- Have a Food Drive through First Day School for Metropolitan Ministries

- Support our Yearly Meeting by supporting individual members who serve SEYM in many capacities including financially supporting the sending of first-time attenders to Yearly Meeting.

- Support members who are representatives to organizations in the wider Quaker world: FGC, FCNL and Friends Peace Teams.

- Support members who have been called to witness with the Occupy Tampa movement.

- Sign an Anti-Domestic Violence Statement with a community of churches at the Justice Center

- Hosted a Quarterly Meeting out of our deep desire to be responsible and effective in how we operate in the realm of peace and social concerns. To help us explore these areas, Mary Lord, long-time Friend affiliated with FCNL and AFSC, led interactive workshop sessions with us.

- Have a Quaker Meeting for Marriage for Cece Yocum and Tom Maciocha – a witness to the larger community of Quaker worship and practices

- Sponsor the Epoch, a local community newspaper that helps to support the homeless

- Provide ongoing financial support to Quaker and other like-minded organizations

Where do you find hope in the Meeting and in our Spiritual life?

We find hope in the experiences of Quaker witness listed above. Hope lies in our children's First Day School in the topics being studied by them (Scripture, Friends Testimonies, and Quaker teachings). We experience hope and joy in increased attendance and therefore continue the process of building a new worship space by engaging the architect. Our worship experience is full of hope. Hope is clearly seen in our care for one another and encouragement not to give up for integrity lies in our efforts and speaks to our living in the manner of Friends. We recognize our need for community in order to keep going, to impact change, and to be Light in the midst of our world. We have hope that in being faithful to each other and to God, way will open.