

Friends Meeting at Cambridge 2017

Ours has been a year of great change. The shifts we have grappled with, both internal and external, have demanded intense energy. As the political climate darkens we find ourselves experiencing tides of shock, grief, and anger, reflected in our Meetings for Worship as well as in our wider Meeting activities. Can we welcome the paradox of struggle, with its freight of fear and loss, and its impetus to draw us together? Can we find Light in this trouble and faithfulness to respond as we are led?

Our meetings for worship, like the hopes we bring to them, have roiled in the wake of the 2016 election. We have felt both gathered, and painfully scattered. Spoken messages too have ranged from reactive to reverent, from accusations and rejoinders about racism, to uplifted breaths of prayer.

In considering this report, several Friends noted a deeper quiet in our recent meetings. Another found joy in the depth of sharings after worship, in the reflective gathering we call Afterthoughts. Perhaps this is the labor the Spirit requires of us.

Outward events have spurred us to renewed public action, within Friends circles and beyond. Many Friends have marched and vigilled, separately and together; many have phoned and emailed legislators; many have joined letter-writing campaigns after meeting. Several from Friends Meeting at Cambridge participated in the Friends Climate Pilgrimage. Our All-Meeting retreat at Alfred, Maine, drew many with its theme of Witness. Friends continue to teach and learn alternatives to violence.

As we carry our testimonies forward, we find ourselves making ever-broader connections. Peace and Social Concerns Committee sponsored more events this year than ever before. Meanwhile, our Meeting has joined with eleven other faith communities to support an immigrant family in sanctuary at University Lutheran church. Thus far 45 Friends from our Meeting have volunteered for shifts in teams there day and night.

We have also undergone our own internal upheaval. This year our Meeting has had to bid farewell to three treasured staff members, to gather our efforts to search for new candidates, and to reconfigure our Resident Friend, Office Manager, and Youth Ministries relationships as we welcome new members into those roles.

In many ways, the literal challenge of this report—to put words to the life of our Meeting—parallels the daily challenge we face in living up to what binds us as a community.

Our numbers prove both a strength and a weakness. Cambridge has the privilege of being a large Meeting, as well as an urban one that draws many visitors. Yet over the years we have grown fewer, and older, with a majority of members over 60. Many Friends long for a closer connection with families and younger members, and for greater cultural, racial and economic diversity – we are overwhelmingly white, middle class, and largely professionals and academics.

These concerns have driven our focus on outreach. This year, we experimented with notices in local papers; hung worship pamphlets on the backs of benches to welcome visitors; and increased our Facebook presence. Members of our Communications group devoted hours to an updated website, already in draft, to be more appealing to visitors. After some discussion—and in a process that felt painfully slow to some—we also placed both rainbow placards and Black Lives Matter signs outside the Meeting.

Gender equality remains a central concern. Many felt ourselves deepened through a second PFlag training; others responded to transgender memorial day in worship. It has become more common for Friends to name their gender-specific pronouns when introducing themselves, for example in Meeting for Business. For some, this option feels welcoming; for others it creates what feels like pressure to adopt a new mode of self-description. We continue to learn from one another's language. Our Marriage and Family Life committee has reformed itself as "Marriage, Family and Relationships," to reflect the variety of connections in our care.

We wonder how to support families and young people more in our community. While First Day School attendance has varied, so that some classes have been combined, a small but steady High School group continues and is growing. At the same time the number of children in the nursery has risen; so have requests for childcare during special events. Activities among Young Adult Friends have increased, and we have funded a YAF coordinator for several hours per week.

We have also funded a coordinator for our new Community of Hope team. This is a program, begun this fall, that we have adopted from the Benedictine tradition to train volunteers to respond to pastoral care needs that arise in the community. Friends who have received care, as well as those on the support team, have described these connections in glowing terms.

These temporary positions are fruits of our Beneficial Cycle planning, a model we have used for six years now in allocating short-term funds. It holds that service nurtures spirit, which nurtures outreach, which in turn strengthens service. Yet these outlays, like funds for extra nursery staff, for New Lights workshops, or for NEYM's deepening "Faithfulness" program, can feel risky. We strive to nourish spiritual growth, but realize that FMC cannot guarantee a return on such investments or sustain them indefinitely. How will we know what leadings to pursue?

Such discernment may be our work in the coming year. We continue to pray for Light. Yet our communication has emerged as the gift that enables us to embrace this uncertainty. We have learned that we need to keep reaching out. Inclusion matters. Transparency matters. Listening matters. The openness we bring to our financial discussions—as to our safe community guidelines, or in practicing Gospel Order—lets us trust one another. This is how we nourish the beloved community.