

Morningside Monthly Meeting 2019 State of the Meeting Report

On December 15, 2019, Morningside Monthly Meeting gathered to discern the spiritual state of the meeting and to meditate on the past year. Members and attenders initially responded to the Query provided by NYYM: *How has the Life of the Spirit been fresh and visibly at work in your Meeting during the past year?* Soon, however, the Spirit took Meeting in a direction of its own, providing fresh queries through messages:

- *Are we venturous? Intimate? Do we have fun?*
- *What were the big events? The small moments?*
- *Do we bring Meeting out to the world? Do we bring the world into the meeting?*
- *What do we need more of?*

The vitality and life of the community is reflected in its growth this year, and we rejoice in the increased numbers of Friends in our community. Morningside has had a net increase of 3 new members (3 new members, 2 - transfers out, 2 - transfers in), and these newcomers want to be an active part of us.

As a spiritual body, we express the life of the Meeting in our examination of ourselves and society, “our own and institutional racism.” The Racial Justice Study Group meets on the 4th Sundays of every month (except July and August), and continues to explore the personal, structural, and basis of racial injustice in the United States. The readings and discussions have enabled a small group of regular attenders and visitors a rare opportunity to deepen our understandings on race, racism and anti-racism in America.

We witness to prisons and to the prison worship that we continue to hold under the care of Meeting. Lofty thoughts on theory and policy manifest themselves on the ground with lobbying, letter writing, making phone calls, visiting representatives in Albany, and maintaining a relationship with the men in the worship group at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility. When we live the lives that we preach, we become both a mystical and practical religion. Friends expressed great appreciation for the depth of the silence during Worship, while honoring the centuries of worship and work that continue in this Meeting. We are unique not only in the manner of our worship, but also in its expression in social action. Meeting is a safety net; members and attenders share the silence while they provide assistance to one another; if someone needs to go to the hospital another Friend will go along. As one person said, “If something bad should happen to me, I know that I will not be alone.”

Morningside has become a safety net not only within the Meeting, but to the larger Morningside neighborhood. Students and faculty from nearby Columbia, Barnard, and several other schools, find Meeting to be a safe space where they can be with others in silence, without a requirement that they identify themselves or promise that they will be here the next week. It was noted, however, that although we are blessed with the attendance of students and faculty, we have no coordinated outreach to the schools. Perhaps we should revisit outreach at these colleges and work with NYYM on the

possibility of a chaplain at Columbia and Barnard. We should at least consider a young adult committee that would interface with the schools.

This year, previous concerns with the exhaustion of committee members has been replaced with a new vitality. There is a new firmness and sense of purpose. Important to the life of the Meeting are the ongoing Spiritual Nurture Groups which provide some of the most intimate spaces offered to the community. Because of their extreme intimacy, these small groups can “become raw”, but they provide a safe space where members can express strong emotions together.

Several people described the Morningside community as a joyous place, where the experiences of anger and risk end in joy. In our monthly gathering of “Moving with Spirit,” we dance together, soaring beyond our words. We also support each other in our artistic endeavors. If, after Meeting for Worship, individuals announce that they are performing somewhere, you can be sure that Morningside Friends will be there for them. The sense of fun is shown in the smiles of retreat attenders. During hospitality hour, we are not only sharing and enjoying each other, but we are also talking with new people. Because hospitality is so essential to who we are, Friends expressed the need for an additional member on the Hospitality Committee. In addition, we need more proactive involvement by members and attenders in the setup and cleanup before and after Meeting for Worship as well as other Meeting functions.

We take risks when we provide hospitality, which requires that we put ourselves out there for others, sharing who we are, what we believe, and what we have. We are experimenting with having a designated person from Ministry and Counsel in place after Meeting for Worship, in order to answer questions about the Meeting and Quakerism. Morningside was privileged to host Quarterly Meeting as NYQM risked its inauguration of a Jubilee Year. It was a joyous and meaningful time for reflection, allowing us to better know one another. The quality of hospitality to NYQM was commented on by Friends outside of Morningside, as was the joy and fun that was generally felt. At the retreat, we embraced the experience of the Council of All Beings, a communal ritual in which participants step aside from their human identity and speak on behalf of another life-form. Although this experience might have been uncomfortable, it was a risk accompanied by shared laughter.

We need to remember the important part that Child Care plays in hospitality, providing a worshipful space for parents who attend meeting, as well as a space where children can enjoy one another. The small moment when children come down to worship feels big, as there is something wondrous in their intermingling with adults, as they increasingly become an important part of the community. In immediate and practical terms, we need another childcare person, as well as more volunteers. We need to consider how Meeting can help provide space for parents and children, so that there is more family time and less screen time.

Attenders of Bible Study stretch and take risks, exposing themselves and their reading of the text to the larger study group. The group meets before Meeting for Worship and provides a foundation for that worship. For some members, Bible Study is the activity

that binds them to Meeting. As one Friend observed, “You don’t have to be into everything, to participate in Meeting.”

At this time in history, many Friends come to Meeting out of great (dis)stress. We bring the noisy world with us which makes it imperative that we not allow the noise to affect the quality of our Worship. We move away from the chaos of the world, but not the world itself, for as we move away from the world in order to worship, we move closer in order to create a world of compassion, family, safety, and consistency. To those who share in worship, Meeting feels like a community that has been built upon a rock, and members expressed their gratefulness for that bedrock; noting with gratitude that it provides a secure foundation for our Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business. One unique way that we move out into the world is through the small group of five or six worshippers at the Quarterly open-air downtown Meeting that we share in the summer. Being quiet and being together in the middle of the noise and activity of the city is a wonderful expression of how we are present in the world.

Our voice is out there, whether at the workplace or letters we have sent to the governor. In all these relations, we present the world with a Third Way. Specifically, Morningside is involved in preparing for the Ribbon Project International next summer, commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as we work for a world without nuclear weapons. This fall, one Friend participated in the inaugural cohort of The Collaborative for Faith Leadership at Union Theological Seminary. A group of six people from various religious institutions met over five sessions to discuss issues of faith, leadership, and social justice. This was a way of reaching out to other religious institutions in our city. It is through specific acts that we are known. A Friend summed up the Meeting with the quote: “By their fruits/action, you shall know him” (Matthew 7:16).

During our talk about social justice, we were reminded of the strength of a past member whose life was committed to fighting social injustice, and who continued to be involved in Peace and Social Concerns as her own health waned. The departure of another Friend reminded us that one of our strengths is how we support members and attenders who are very sick and preparing for death. In many ways, Meeting feels alive, partly because we remember those who have passed, whose lives gave testimony to their beliefs, and who trusted Meeting to be with them in their final and most intimate moments.

In Friendship,

Jane Alexandre, Clerk