

State of the Meeting Report from Morningside Monthly Meeting for 2009

We gathered on the afternoon of Sunday, December 20 to consider the state of our Meeting and to reflect upon the queries posed by the Yearly Meeting. The nature of our gathering – a discussion open to all, which followed a favorite annual social event as well as our weekly worship and fellowship – was itself a reflection of our identity and values as a community. The Living Love is experienced as very present amongst us, reaching out to members and attenders as we strive to live in accordance with the Quaker testimonies. We currently have 54 adult members, including one transfer into Meeting this year. There are two associate members. No deaths of members occurred this year and no one was released from membership.

The life of our community and the depth and centeredness of our worship are enriched by the many opportunities we create for coming together both formally and informally in smaller groups – opportunities that are especially important for an urban meeting such as ours. The two spiritual nurture groups that have been meeting regularly for a number of years have deepened both the trust and worship that exist not only within those groups but also within the meeting at large, as participants have been challenged by their readings, worship and discussions to examine more closely and to share more fully their answers to the question “How are we with God at this time?” We look forward to forming additional spiritual nurture groups this year, and are eager to learn from the existing groups about ways in which we can help the new ones to thrive.

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) workshop sponsored by Meeting last January provided another opportunity for members of the community to come together outside the context of meeting for worship, and to address wider concerns. Those who attended were brought closer to each other, and several people attended the AVP National Conference in May. In a similar demonstration of the dynamic relationship between our meeting community and the world at large, one attender spoke of how helpful it was to her to participate in the LGBT Pride Parade alongside other New York Friends. Morningside’s strong presence at this event continues to serve as a reminder to her of the presence of a grounded, authentic community.

Our Ministry and Counsel Committee (M&C) continues to grow stronger and stronger, and we are grateful both for the way the committee is led and for the way its work is shared among its members, especially as we recognize that the committee has been functioning with seven, as opposed to nine, members. A nearly full roster (8 members) for the coming year makes us hopeful that more members of M&C will be in attendance at meeting for worship on a regular basis. The program of monthly after-meeting discussions sponsored by M&C continues to enrich the spiritual life of our community, and topics have included *The Testimony of Equality*, *Committees of Clearness and Support*, *Speaking and Listening in Meeting for Worship*, and *Membership in Meeting*. The discussion on Membership especially prompted a deep level of sharing for all who attended, regardless of their length of association with the Meeting.

Committees of Clearness and Support form an integral part of our meeting life, and are among the most important ways that we practice loving one another – bringing light and love to those with concerns or the need for discernment, emotional support, or practical assistance, and nurturing the ministry and leadings of those in our Meeting. At any given time, there are approximately ten to twelve active committees, as those whose work is completed are laid down and new ones are formed to address a wide variety of current needs. In addition to membership clearness committees, support committees have been provided to those facing serious illness or personal loss, significant difficulties or transitions in their professional lives, and challenging leadings in their personal ministry.

As we considered the current state of our ministry to youth, we noted that we have had a high school student serving as a member of Ministry and Counsel this past year, and that that experiment has worked well. Although we might have been more accessible to young people when we met on the campus of Columbia University, we still have students from Barnard College, Manhattan School of Music and Union Theological Seminary who attend our meeting.

Our First Day School is small, with two children in regular attendance and several others in “semi-regular” attendance. Thanks to the efforts of dedicated parents, it continues to grow with respect to the organization of its physical space and programming. With only the most appropriate amount of pride, we celebrate the fact that a former First Day School student has assumed a leadership role in First Day School. At the same time, we are concerned that it is difficult for us to find non-parent First Day School teachers and that we are depending heavily on one person for the overall programming. In this, as in several other areas yet to be mentioned, we are all asked to examine our own gifts to see whether we might be called to offer our time and talents to the Meeting.

In the past year, we found ourselves particularly challenged when no one came forward to serve the Meeting as Clerk. As a result, Ministry and Counsel arranged for rotating clerks, with a different person serving each month. Although it was asking a lot of our Recording Clerk to adjust to different clerking styles every month and people outside the Meeting often did not know whom to contact, this arrangement had its upsides as well. It reflected our corporate strength, helped us nurture future leaders, and helped us develop tenderness toward the person who was serving as Clerk on any given day. While we recognize that we would not want to be in this position every year – and are grateful that we will have one Clerk in 2010 – we acknowledge that the experience has left us broader and deeper as a Meeting.

We continue to function without a newsletter, an important tool for outreach. Our e-mail list is functioning, and we continue to use it and our website more and more effectively as tools for communication within the Meeting and for reaching out to a wider group of people. Here again, we all need to look at what ministry we have to give to see if anyone is ready to take on the responsibilities of a newsletter in the future.

With regard to our financial health, we note with some concern that for the first time in our history we will need to use a portion of our reserve fund in order to support our Peace and Social Concerns budget (which was combined with our Friends in Unity with Nature budget this year). This financial outreach constitutes a significant portion of our annual budget and is a vital part of the life of our Meeting. Each year, we carefully review and revise the list of organizations to which we contribute, aiming to support the work of individuals in Meeting; to balance contributions among local, national and international concerns; and to contribute to organizations for whom a small amount of money might make a difference. We are grateful to have a reserve to call on, but recognize the fact that current economic conditions will require us to be especially diligent in the coming year as we combine a faithfulness that our needs will be provided for with a prudent and Spirit-led stewardship of our resources.

For the second consecutive year, we have been at home in a permanent space in Riverside Church, rather than being moved among a variety of rooms. Although we still have no lease, we also have not had our rent increased. The relative stability of this situation has allowed us to feel more at home in our space, to expand our library into a hospitable and valuable resource for the use of members and attenders, and to establish more of a presence.

As we become more and more at home in our space, we are more and more able to welcome others to it and to reach out from it into the world at large. We created a new welcome brochure (attached) to help newcomers feel more immediately at home, and we continue to use nametags (individually decorated with stickers as a reflection of our playful, joyous spirit) and to hold monthly welcome breakfasts to which all are invited.

We are aware of the need to look continually at classism and racism. We are welcoming to people of color who attend, yet we acknowledge that we could do more corporate outreach to communities of color. At the same time, we have several members who are active on the Yearly Meeting Committees for Black Concerns, Prisons, and the Task Force on Racism. With Scarsdale Meeting, we have hosted the reunion of formerly incarcerated members of Quaker Worship Groups in prisons as well as participating in Meeting for Worship at the Redemption Center, and we have members who work with Riverside Prison Ministry. Our Meeting also serves as the conduit for contributions to Hope Lives for Lifers and the Incarcerated Girls Project, in which our members are active. People who have been incarcerated say they have felt welcome here.

Whether joyfully wrapping one of our members in the gift of a quilt bearing handprints of the entire community as a reminder that we are always with her, or participating in an annual cookie swap, or accompanying an ill friend to a medical appointment, we celebrate the variety of ways in which we make our love known to one another. At the same time, we know that we need always to examine the human tendency to be comfortable with the people we know, and to challenge ourselves to share that love outward, to be willing always to welcome the stranger as the person we most need to hear from.