

State of Society Report 2019
Old Chatham Monthly Meeting

“How has the life of the spirit been fresh and visibly at work in your meeting this year?”

Our meeting has a diverse group of members and attenders, including folks who express a deep faith in the divine, those for whom activism is a guiding spirit, and those who come in order to care for and be with other members of the community. We have always been an inclusive group, accepting our differences and looking for ways to reach out to others. In the past few years, we have had several small Meetings for Learning centered on deepening worship, led by a member of our meeting. When the idea of having a whole meeting retreat centered on accessing deep nurturing worship was broached, we received a positive response from a large group. We decided to ask Christopher Sammond, who has been leading these retreats for some years, to facilitate. Our retreat took place in early January, 2020 and was a richly satisfying event.

There were opportunities for partner discussions, small group and whole group sharing. We got to know one other on a deeper, personal level. Many of us reflected afterwards that the opportunity to connect as individuals helped to deepen our experience of worshipping together. Building trust and community are not what we immediately think of as crucial to our spiritual needs, but they are crucial to creating a deeper cohesion and spiritual connectedness. As Quakers we have always held a concern for each other's physical and emotional health. The retreat discussions gave us a deeper, nurturing appreciation of each other that will help us continue to be present to one another.

Many visitors have commented on the physical beauty of the Meeting House that we built, but more importantly are the comments that people feel welcome, that they feel Spirit at work when they enter. We sometimes have meetings without any messages, which feel deep and gathered. We are a relatively quiet meeting, but our messages are from the heart and people speak when they are led.

We have ongoing opportunities to foster the life of the Spirit in our meeting. Worship sharing occurs every Tuesday evening, when a small group gathers to reflect on words related to spiritual, intellectual or community life. Our Women and Aging Group has been meeting monthly for close to five years. We have a group ranging in ages from sixty to ninety who address topics that deal with the challenges and gifts of aging. It is a group that provides deep friendship, support and inspiration for one another.

Ministry and Counsel continues to address pastoral care issues, particularly because we have several members in their eighties and nineties and others with some significant physical challenges. We have organized rides to doctors, meal deliveries, care committees and visits to people in hospital or confined to their homes. In our Meeting, we have families facing great challenges: seriously ill or aging parents, accidents, cancer and other serious illnesses. We feel strong in the ministry of helping one another through life transitions. Fortunately, we also have many volunteers not on Ministry and Counsel who offer help in the form of a visit or a car ride when needed. There is a great deal of love and care shown to one another. In addition, we will have a "Share the Care" workshop from ARCH at the end of March to help us address the needs of our members more smoothly.

Once a month at the rise of Meeting for Worship we have potluck meals, which are wonderfully facilitated by our Welcoming Committee. There is always sufficient food, time, space and people attending. Potluck attenders often stay until the room is being cleared of tables and chairs, enjoying breaking bread and being in each other's company.

Our Outreach, Peace and Justice Committee continues to organize the meeting's monthly movies that are open to people in the community. Many of our movie attendees have come to other events as well. One of our goals in building our Meeting House was to provide a space for the community to participate in a variety of activities as well as to issue an invitation to join our community.

We have a small group of youngsters who participate in our Children and Youth Program as well as the intergenerational events we hold. At our Christmas candle lighting ceremony, several made wishes for peace or expressed sadness for children who do not receive gifts for the holiday. It was clear that they are listening to the Quaker testimonies that they are learning both at home and on Sunday mornings.

We are keenly aware that being immersed in the life of the spirit, if only in our own minds and hearts, is not sufficient. We need to use our spirituality to help us be in the world with others and at times to take action for our deeply held beliefs. One aspect we practiced together was bystander intervention to prevent and address harassment and discrimination we witness. During our retreat, some of the discussions turned to issues of control and our own prejudices. Hopefully, we will use the sense of connection and trust that evolved to help us grow in integrity, in honesty and in care for both the earth and our fellow humans beyond our own circle.

