

Old Chatham Monthly Meeting

State of the Meeting for 2023

The beauty of Nature in the Hudson Valley is stunning, but Old Chatham Friends are distressed when we consider the natural disasters brought on by climate change, not to mention the destruction and death wrought by war. And we certainly care about our own Friends when they are ill. In our Meeting we invite all human experience to be brought into silent worship and vocal ministry. That silence, that speech, feeds and nourishes us, bringing us closer to the mystery of the universe that some have called God, that others have called Spirit, that early Quakers called the Inward Light.

Ours is a diverse gathering of seekers. Our members and attenders draw from—and sometimes combine—traditions that are Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Stoic, New Age, social activist, and non-theist, not to mention other beliefs and practices that grace our Meeting. We deepen our individual spiritualities by enriching them with those of other Friends.

In more concrete terms, we have four great concerns: the care of our families, outreach, the physical health of our people, and spiritual friendship among members and attenders.

Our regular children and youth attenders are few in number but cherished, and we try to communicate regularly with parents. We are fortunate to have found a caring and reliable childcare person. We are grateful for learnings from Yearly Meeting's workshop, "Engaging Voices for the Next Generation," in which we are reminded to think about whose needs are being centered in our Meeting.

We are pleased to have an influx of newcomers to our Meeting almost every time we gather, but disconcerted by the fact that most of these attenders come once or twice and then "disappear." We ask ourselves if we are doing something that discourages them from returning, but we believe that we are simply observing a pattern of attendance that applies to all houses of worship in the U.S. Only 20% of Americans attend worship services every week. If we include those who attend monthly, that figure rises to 41%. Seldom or never in attendance are some 57% (Gallup). In short, we face the same problem that all faith communities face. We do try to personally welcome visitors although it's sometimes difficult to talk to all the newcomers before they leave the meetinghouse. Our Meeting newsletter is another kind of outreach. It is sent out to five or six times as many people as attend Meeting for Worship.

Blended worship has transformed Old Chatham Meeting. Like many faith communities, we have embraced the outreach of hybrid worship. With Zoom, we can feel the palpable presence of silence, and the vocal messages of members and attenders can certainly arrive through the internet. Our hybrid meetings allow those who are infirm or at a distance to participate in worship. At the same time, some Friends (mostly parents with children) have expressed discomfort with technology in our Meeting for Worship space. We continue to seek ways to include and make all comfortable.

Then there is the matter of the physical health of our members and attenders, many of whom are older. When we schedule events or invite Friends to serve on committees, we struggle sometimes to balance, on the one hand, the over-70's decreasing energy and health challenges, and on the other, the under-60's very full work and family schedules. However, we are addressing the needs of our older members and attenders with care committees and individual volunteers. And we recently hosted Kevin Lovelady, the director of New York Yearly Meeting's ARCH program, which has developed resources to help older Friends. Kevin commented that we are on the right track in supporting our older members and attenders.

Finally, there is the issue of spiritual friendship. Whether in worship or other Meeting activities, listening carefully and laying aside the ego is necessary for spiritual friendship. We cultivate this friendship in worship, in a Worship Sharing Group, in a Women and Aging Group, in a Faithful Meetings series from School of the Spirit, and in special meetings on various topics. In recent worship sharing sessions on vocal ministry, we have discovered that some members are troubled by the numerous messages that break the silence of our Meeting. Others are grateful for what they consider a rich vocal ministry. We trust that spiritual friendship will overcome these differences.

As we look back on 2023, we see progress and are thankful for the spiritual depth of our Meeting. Nevertheless, we seek to do even better, we seek to be even more faithful, we seek to be even more united.