It was neither the best of times nor the worst of times, but rather a time of small advances and little retreats, of both stirrings and settlings. For Bellingham Friends, 2018 was a year in which our collective wisdom deepened a bit while our attendance declined slightly. We were joined by several eager new attenders but saw little of some who had been regular attenders. Two Friends, Stephanie Manzo and Wendy Goldstein, who had each attended for about four years, were welcomed as formal members of our Meeting.

Our Baby Welcoming for Saia Manzo and Memorial Meeting for Judy Hill both helped better define and bring our community together. Participation in care committees and in ongoing Spiritual Nurture Groups has helped some of us to feel more connected to the Meeting and each other, and our monthly discussion groups (Books, Spirit, Friendly Discussion, and Earthcare) continue to flourish. At the same time, some Bellingham Friends have felt that we were less spiritual, as a group, in 2018 as compared with the previous year, that there has been less vocal ministry, and that much of what there is has seemed more from the headlines than from the heart. We also continue to struggle with finding the volunteer energy to accomplish the chores needed for our weekly worship and to staff our committees adequately. Recent discussions have helped us try to simplify our needs and broaden participation in meeting them, but some Friends have expressed a feeling of being burned out from doing more than they can joyfully sustain.

We continue to feel a deep longing to have our own Meetinghouse to replace the rented space we have used for the last 13 years. Our relatively new Meetinghouse Committee has worked hard to develop more refined statements of our requirements and priorities and to identify possible properties to purchase, build on, or rent in place of our current location, but so far no available option has been both affordable and workable for our needs. We have approved holding a Capital Campaign to increase the range of affordability, and currently await the availability of the human resources needed to further define and execute such a campaign.

Our work in the world expanded significantly in 2018. We are now participating, as a support congregation, in the Family Promise Program of the Interfaith Coalition, which provides temporary housing and other resources to help homeless families with children. In November we drafted and approved a minute on hate crimes in response to recent hate-motivated violence in Pittsburgh, Kentucky, and elsewhere, and have since circulated the minute to various groups in our community and North Pacific Yearly Meeting and to the media. Meanwhile, our Social and Environmental Concerns Committee has continued to provide structure and leadership to our engagement with social justice issues through the Concern of the Month, monthly letter-writing gatherings, and discernment of priorities for annual donations by the Meeting to a variety of worthy organizations such as AFSC, FCNL, and the local Whatcom Peace and Justice Center. The SEC Committee also uplifts the many ways that individual Bellingham Friends have “let their lives speak” regarding social and racial justice, concern for the environment, and manifesting the “Beloved Community”.

Bellingham Friends Meeting was also strongly tested this last year. The issue of sexual abuse strained our Meeting, but has helped us become more clear about our needs and responsibilities toward each other. This is an ongoing challenge, but we are learning how to exist with disagreements and to become more easy with the discomfort that conflict can bring.

Our Children’s Program and the committee that supports it are both doing well. We would like to have more children coming to Meeting regularly, but for now having a paid childcare provider and a volunteer teacher from our Meeting each Sunday has been working well. There are several Junior Friends who have formed their own Meeting for Business. Meanwhile, Nominating Committee has asked some of the older children to serve on regular Meeting committees as they are able.

The Outreach and Welcoming Committee continues to provide leadership to our efforts to welcome new attenders and Friends returning after long absence, through such means as “Welcoming Newcomers Potlucks”, “Soup and Stories” second hours, and various steps to encourage the integration of new attenders into the full life of our Meeting and deeper understanding of the Quaker Way. The OWC also oversees our participation at occasional outreach opportunities in the wider community.

All in all, while experiencing major challenges and limitations during 2018, Bellingham Friends Meeting faces 2019 with courage and greater experience.