State of the Missoula Monthly Meeting of Friends

June 2019

To Friends everywhere:

As we reflect on the life of our Meeting, we find ample evidence of constancy in our spiritual practice as well as a quiet longing for growth and adaptation. As in previous years, we recognize our ongoing struggle to maintain our Meeting as Friends have reduced their attendance, moved to other Meetings, or died, and smaller numbers of new members and attenders have joined our Meeting. Dwindling attendance also makes it more difficult to practice effective outreach among Friends and our local community. Friends at times feel disconnected or undervalued after years of active participation, and many potential attenders undoubtedly live in Missoula without awareness of our Meeting. There is a certain tension ever present between the desire to be known as a community resource and spiritual sanctuary and our steadfast commitment to avoid active recruitment. These topics were the major foci of our State of the Meeting discussion. To help organize our thoughts, we responded to the following related queries found in NPYM’s *Faith & Practice*.

1. In what ways do we each take our share of responsibility in service of the Meeting and contribute to the life of the Meeting?

2. In what ways are we bringing together Members and Attenders, young and old, in love and community? Do we visit one another in our homes and keep in touch with distant members?

3. How are strangers made to feel welcome in our midst? How do we encourage Attenders to share in Meeting activities and responsibilities and to consider membership when they are ready?

**Contributing to the Life of the Meeting**

Members and attenders alike are regularly encouraged to participate in Meeting activities and contribute to the after-meeting soup rotation, committees, community outreach, and peaceful activism. Our Committees on Finance, Building, and Ministry & Oversight continue to be integral parts of our Meeting, although the size of most committees has waned alongside attendance in recent years. Our Peace & Social Concern committee has sadly been entirely vacated, an absence that was keenly felt as we considered how best to distribute charitable funds this year. Committee participation is a general area of concern we hope to address in the coming year, in part by welcoming participation from some of the newer Friends.

Our spiritual practice and knowledge of Quaker tradition has been bolstered by two series of Quaker history book studies. Our readings included *Portrait in Grey* by John Punshon as well as a book by Ben Pink Dandelion. Meeting to discuss such books provides opportunities to learn about our history while also acknowledging and engaging with evolving Quaker beliefs and
practices. Doing so encourages each of us to regularly connect with and consider our individual thoughts and actions.

**Bringing Together Members and Attenders**

Fostering a close, welcoming, and supportive Meeting is at the core of our work as Quakers. We nurture that intention through a variety of shared meals, meetings, and activities. Friends host potlucks in their homes during the winter and summer months, and except for the summer season, Sunday Meetings for Worship are followed by a simple lunch and fellowship in the Meeting house. We enjoy festive gatherings around holidays including a yearly Halloween party and Gingerbread House Making party. This winter we also contemplated the meaning of Christmas during a Quaker Education Meeting guided by a teenager and an adult member. We further encourage intergenerational connections through activities like our cross country ski trip.

Beyond our established activities, however, there is room for growth. One Friend shared her frustration and disappointment that her absence from several consecutive Meetings for Worship was not met with outreach. Another Friend expressed interest in committee involvement and future membership but said she felt uncertain about whether or when she was allowed to request such. It is hard to know whom to ask for information or how to participate beyond Meetings for Worship. Overall, there has been a decrease in the number of meetings, committees, and activities for current members and attenders. Those in attendance suggested many possible changes and updates to outreach, including offering additional Meetings for Worship at different times, providing information on participation and membership in accessible locations in the Meeting House, instituting mandatory rotations on committees, surveying Friends about what brings them to Meeting or drives them away, and encouraging candid feedback in general.

The relationships we establish with one another over soup and bread are often solidified through gestures of love and support, particularly in moments of hardship. We are especially dedicated to caring for members suffering and recovering from illness, injury, or loss by providing meals, running errands, helping with household chores, and writing letters of support. In one noted example, Missoula Friends have organized to provide weekly meals for the family of a Friend who is receiving chemotherapy in Boston.

We also share our grief as we mourn Friends who have died. Our beloved Friend, Barbara Spring, died in New York state on June 18, 2019. She was a champion of peace, racial justice, and fearless outreach and a role model of Quaker values. She will be lovingly remembered by those who knew her.

Several of us have experienced the deaths and illnesses of family members or our own illnesses and have felt the large, generous support of our small meeting.
Welcoming Strangers & Encouraging Participation

We practice community outreach in the spirit of Quaker tradition, ministering to those in need and building connections across faiths and circumstances. Three Friends have been working with the Missoula Interfaith Collaborative on housing issues, including conducting a door-to-door housing survey in the neighborhood. Friends also work with Family Promise, which brings together local congregations and businesses to support families in need. Several Friends travel to Helena to speak with legislators and advocate for peace and justice.

Serving new individuals who come to our Meeting is equally central to our values, but very few new individuals show up. When new people begin attending, Missoula Friends are always welcoming, but we realize that we often fail to provide adequate information and resources about our faith and practice. Furthermore, we are rarely aware of how new attendees find us or why they choose to stay or move on. We have also been forced to stop advertising in local newspapers due to cost. When discussing the State of the Meeting, several Friends expressed fears that our Meeting is unknown to many who might otherwise find a home in our Meeting. One Friend described our shrinking congregation as a quiet crisis, but together we intend to respond.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah Jane Wood, Missoula Friends Meeting