

State of the Meeting 2010:

On a chilly Firstday evening, Jacksonville Friends Meeting held a worship sharing session to the sounds of a crackling fire at the Geiger farmhouse to reflect on the spiritual state of the meeting for the 2010 year. Present were the incoming clerk, the outgoing clerk, seven regular attenders and members, Cody-the-wonder-dog, and Bess, the resident good dog. The quiet but notable presence of both beloved pets attested to the peacefulness and joy which pervaded our worship sharing.

There's a blessing in the midst of meeting. Our spiritual strength is palpable. We have grown in our spiritual conversation because of our monthly Friday night meetings for learning which have included Quakerism 101, worship sharing around queries, a book, and pamphlets, and studying Quaker principles and spirituality. We hear how we talk about our spiritual practices and we hear each other; we can better translate each other's language of belief and experience. We are learning how to recognize what we share spiritually.

We have experienced a maturing of being attentive to one another. We have gone through more-than-usual challenges with health, family, deaths, and other crises, and we have been there for each other. As our meeting has become more cohesive, we have been better able to be supportive of each other. There's a lot more interacting outside of meeting for worship and supporting each other day to day which is just as important as spiritual stuff. That is what it's about; spirituality is how you live and what you do (not just what you profess to believe.)

The silence of our meeting is usually rich and fulfilling. That is one of our gifts to the community at large. There is a deep human need for silence—it is a precious commodity. We bring quietness. Just that one thing alone is of great value to community—to the Quaker community and the larger community. Our meeting for worship offers an antidote to the constant bombardment of noise and distractions.

We meet at a private-school library—away from traffic noise, amidst trees and chirping birds—where cats, raccoons, and an occasional fox wander by. The number of Friends attending meeting for worship regularly is between 9 and 15. We have welcomed a new member and a handful of regular and irregularly regular new attenders. JMM's long time clerk has resigned and we have a new clerk who is also new to clerking. A fledgling childrens' FirstDay School regularly brings to meeting 3 children, age 4 and a couple of teens, with a teen guiding them. We feel their presence as a great blessing; at the same time, we are unsure how to fully support and develop such an endeavor. In this area we need to grow.

We need to find ways—individually and collectively—to explore spoken ministry and the traditional approach to meeting for business as a “meeting for worship with a concern for business”. Meetings for business for many years have rarely centered in worship and the search for God's truth—they have been mainly focused on the nuts and bolts of a small meeting without the burden (and graces) of a meeting house to contend with. (At times, when there has been a nut or bolt with wings, we have found the gift of centered worship to discern our direction in dealing with a concern raised by another meeting or SEYM). Usually our business meetings have been pragmatic and often time constrained:

discussion of issues has been as in a secular business meeting rather than “after the manner of Friends”. We have been stumbling over the term ‘business’– which often means OFFICIAL stuff–and how we worship on the well-being and concerns and business of meeting. Business meetings have not been centered on the search as much as on the process of getting through the agenda before everyone must scatter to the wind. We affirm the need for deliberate, divinely guided meetings for Worship with a concern for business.

We support each other in individual efforts but we have not had ministry of the meeting ‘as a whole’. An early reading of convention Christian witness means: go out and tell people about your religion. Friends’ witness means: go out and BE friends with people or individuals in an attentiveness to others’ needs. We have yet to discern what our witness to the world is, what we can do as a meeting. We have been supportive of one another in individual ways—including individuals’ participation in the social and peace fabric of the Jacksonville and surrounding communities—but we have not found common concerns for collective witness. We have experienced inward-directed witness to our Quaker family/community this year, seeking better understanding of each other and better support for each other in meeting challenges of illness, death and other family crises. In this way we are preparing ourselves to witness to the wider world.

We ended our worship sharing as Bess the good dog roused from her nap before the fire-- telling Cody ‘goodbye’ with a sniff of the noses, she left the room.