

State of the Society Report to Annual Session 2019

*"[They] not busy being born is busy dying."
--Bob Dylan*

A senescent tree, while slowly dying—rotting from the inside, harboring disease, branches dying off and falling—may still be leafing out in the spring, putting on some new growth, even flowering and fruiting in season, feeding critters and sheltering tender new growth in its shade. Once fallen, it may continue to foster new life in its shade. An older forest may have senescent trees alongside some healthy ancient trees and some standing dead trees (snags, providing habitat for other creatures). There may or may not be saplings to take the place of the trees that are dying.

This could be a metaphor for Pacific Yearly Meeting. Is the old Pacific Yearly Meeting is on its way out? You have only to look at the numbers in attendance at annual sessions: half what it was not so many years ago at Mount Madonna. JYM is a third what it was at its peak; the Children's Program similarly shrunken. Many of the constituent monthly meetings in their state of the meeting reports talk about an aging membership, shrinking numbers, not enough people to fill the roles to do the work of the meeting. Fewer than half the reporting meetings talk in their reports about a children's program. If spoken of, the program may sometimes consist of a plan in the case of a child or children showing up. In the words of one passionate young Friend, "This is a crisis! PYM is dying."

And yet there is regrowth. We see it in the younger Friends who now fill positions in our most essential yearly meeting committees. We see it in the handful of meetings who chronicle increasing numbers of younger people or a flourishing children's program. Not surprisingly, those meetings that have developed outreach strategies are more likely to see increases in attendance than others. It is not clear to what extent the yearly meeting as a whole or its constituent monthly meetings will be successful in passing on their treasures, after years of hiding them under the bushel basket.

We see most meetings faithfully involved in social issues and community service: common areas of corporate concern show up, for example, as involvement in feeding and sheltering the homeless and in immigration issues. Often, meetings support individuals in their leadings and take pride in this work.

Many meetings report the spiritual sustenance of worship, with or without vocal ministry. Many meetings support this sustenance with religious education of one sort or another—meeting retreats, worship sharing, "seekers" gatherings before or after meeting for exploration and discussion, and so forth. Likewise important to people of many meetings is the community and fellowship aspect of Quaker life. Meetings support this community life in various ways. Activities designed to deepen spiritual life and those designed to promote community overlap. What we don't hear often in the state of the meeting reports is accounts of how Spirit is moving amongst us, shaking us and changing us. We, our meetings, our country, our world stand in dire need of transformation; we seem to be still waiting in the dark, not yet recognizing the transformation that is being asked of us.

In counterpoint to this appreciation of community and fellowship, a number of meetings and some committees report struggling with conflict and discord, sometimes with the corroding effects of longstanding personal rancor. Meetings have been torn apart when domestic violence or sexual abuse of children is unmasked in the meeting community. More subtly, micro-aggressions against women, people of color, women, or elders may disturb the community even if not brought to light. Occasionally, it is reported that moving through conflict and discord has strengthened the meeting; yet often meetings continue to struggle, sometimes diminished in the effort.

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Anti-racism work not just in the world but in our own meetings is an emerging area of concern, expressed by yearly meeting committees—Ministry and Oversight, Peace and Social Order, and Youth Program Coordinator Committee—as well as a monthly meeting here or there. This concern goes beyond our long established commitment to racial justice (as witnessed in our equality testimony) to the challenge of confronting and dismantling embedded unconscious racism in ourselves and in our dominantly white meetings. There is an emerging yearning for more diversity in our midst, a growing awareness of the riches we've been unconsciously excluding. This yearning is prompted into action by the People of Color affinity group and by individuals amongst us. We are reminded that historical racism is still embedded in hurtful behaviors. The fulfillment of this yearning to break loose from the chains of our embodied hurts and hurtfulness is messy work with many individual and corporate challenges to be opened and faced. There will continue to be failures and woundings. Much humility plus tenderness towards one another will be needed in order to faithfully put into practice the core mandate: "Love ye one another."

Notably absent from most of our state of the meeting reports is activity around climate change. Our yearly meeting's Unity With Nature committee is in total disarray. This critical issue of the decade, so in need of action grounded in spirit, an issue which draws the energy of so many young people globally, is in the foreground of the work of other Quaker organizations worldwide. Take a look at the sustainability resources of the Friends World Committee on consultation (www.fwcc.world) and the webpage of Quakers and Climate Change Worldwide (<https://quakersandclimatechange.com>) for starters. This is a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-generational concern for survival of life on our planet, including ourselves; an issue that already affects most strongly the dispossessed of the world, mostly people of color. It's an issue of great urgency; scientists say we're entering a make-it-or-break-it decade. Our testimonies offer us guidance. And yet, with a few exceptions, our Pacific Yearly Meeting voices appear to be largely missing. PYM has a long history of earthcare witness—are we fading at this critical time? The injunction to "love your neighbor"—does it apply to all the neighbors we share this planet with, all human beings as well as all our relatives, the other animals and the plants? If we took this commandment seriously, if we took it a step deeper, what might we be called to do?

This report was prepared by the Ministry and Oversight Committee