

SELECTIONS FROM QUERY RESPONSES SUBMITTED BY MONTHLY MEETINGS FOR 2019 ANNUAL SESSIONS

Query 1 - Meeting for Worship

Are our Meetings for Worship held in a spirit of expectant waiting and communion with the Holy Spirit? How do we prepare our hearts and minds for worship?

How do we refer to that which is divine? How does ascribing gender to the Holy Spirit affect our worship?

How do we integrate our daily lives with Meeting for Worship? Do we seek opportunities for worship outside of meeting?

How does the vocal ministry of the meeting contribute to its spiritual life? In what ways do we recognize and nurture vocal ministry and other spiritual gifts?

Responses:

- ❖ Sometimes it is very obvious that you should be giving vocal ministry, there is a physical feeling, like quaking, that makes you feel like you should be talking. If you're feeling like you need to say it, you don't have to understand why, or who the message might be for. When I first started attending there were many more who spoke out in meeting, and sometimes the message would become more meaningful or important to me later, even months or years later.
- ❖ Practices at home, such as a moment of silence before eating, help us in many ways, including living with a feeling of gratitude, and bringing centered worship more easily. Practice over the years has made it easy for us to enter that frame of mind on Sunday mornings, and even other times during the week, and in times of trouble or when something needs to be put "in God's hands" because we don't have control over it. Even a minute or two of worship can provide a sense of God's presence throughout the day.
- ❖ Some use simple words like "thank you", "wow", "help me". When I am angry with someone, if I wait patiently I will be taught ways to empathize with the person and learn something about myself from the situation. I find that the older I get, the more I am aware of the gifts I have been given and grateful for the experiences I've had. I am trusting God more than I did when I was younger. Life is often a learning that our personal power is not as great as we once thought it was.
- ❖ Regarding the gender of God, you don't know how powerful the pronoun is until you switch it and notice the different images or feelings that are invoked within you. Of course, God is really both and neither, and there is no way to know or define God entirely; the images we use are only reflections of our needs, not of God itself.

Query 2 - Outreach

Do we encourage inter-visitation within the Yearly Meeting and with other Friends?

What are we doing to share our faith with others outside our Friends' community? How do we speak truth as we know it and yet remain open to truth as understood by others?

In what ways do we cooperate with persons and groups with whom we share concerns? How do we reach out to those with whom we disagree?

How do we make the presence of our meeting known to the larger community? Do we invite others to share in our Meetings for Worship and other meeting activities? Do we welcome everyone and appreciate the gifts that differences such as race, creed, economic status, disability, age, gender or sexual orientation may bring to us?

Responses:

- ❖ We have visited with various Friends who travel regularly to other meetings and enjoy hearing about all the things that connect us, as well as passing on our greetings to others. We include visiting faraway meetings during our family vacations, especially meetings that have connections to our own. History comes alive when we are able to discover the seeds that scattered and grew into new meetings all over this country and beyond. We feel the warmth of the community of Friends when we are able to visit these far-flung meetings.
- ❖ On cooperation with those with whom we share concerns: Challenging both sides may be more in keeping with the Spirit than tolerating and forming alliances with the lesser evil. Done in the Spirit of Love it can move both sides toward Truth. An example of challenging both sides was an objection to the letter proposed at IYMC 2018 sessions by the Peace and Social Concerns Committee opposing the Authorization of Use of Military Force. Many wanted to support the bill because it would restrict authority of the US president to go to war, but because it would grant Congress that authority, it fell short. Political lobbying with integrity can bear fruit and bring others to the Light. We seem to be in a phase of focusing on getting the bad guys out and good guys in, and we need to remember to support right action by either side. We are conflicted about whether to compromise and support the person who is more electable or support the person who is more right. We need to remember that good actions and bad actions have happened regardless of which party is in power. We've never had a pure and perfect political leader, even when they were Quakers.
- ❖ We feel we do well in cooperating with persons and groups with whom we share concerns, but not so well in reaching out to those with whom we disagree. Is this because we fear we would invite rejection? Those of us who vigil in opposition to the death penalty are doing a form of outreach to some who may disagree with us.
- ❖ We feel we welcome all who walk in our door, but we wonder how we can connect with those outside who may want to come but are not aware that we are here, or of who we are. A newcomer shared that she recognized in our group something that resonated, something she could not name— unless perhaps its name is Love.
- ❖ We realize that we put a lot of responsibility on everyone who comes. We expect people to live their beliefs. For us, how we live our lives is what is important, what we do here and now while we are alive, rather than what might happen after death, something we cannot know.

Query 3 – Meeting for Business

How can we hold our Meetings for Business in the spirit of love, understanding and patient search for unity without becoming frustrated by differences of opinion or the pressures of time?

How do we respond when no one else in the meeting seems to hold the views that we do on an issue? How do we respond to a dissenting minority?

How do we share responsibilities among Friends in our meeting?

How do we serve our meetings?

Responses:

- ❖ Many of us feel comfortable expressing our views here, and do not feel that we will be judged for doing so. Some of us DO feel stressed about sharing views that we know others do not share, and it requires some courage and determination to override these fears. We are such a small group that it can be hard to find Friends who share our desire to focus on a particular area of interest, whether it be eliminating nuclear weapons, promoting support for prisoners re-entering society, or living a greener, eco-friendly lifestyle. We all benefit when the Spirit assures us that this is a safe place to empty our hearts.
- ❖ The sound system continues to be improved. It is difficult to hear, especially when the heater is running. We are getting used to using the microphone. In the past, some of us have been reluctant to speak when we are unsure of what has been said. Communication is becoming easier and more productive as we use these devices.
- ❖ As well as commonalities, there may be considerable diversity among Friends. It often takes Friends a long time to reach clarity on an issue. This is because great care tends to be taken to listen to and consider all voices. An issue may need seasoning, which may mean a time to process the question outside of business meeting as well as inside. We strongly affirm that we learn more by listening than by talking.

Query 4 – Harmony within the Meeting

What can we do to deepen our relationships with one another? How does gender affect the way we relate to each other?

How does our meeting balance the needs for honesty and kindness? What topics do we avoid for the sake of “unity”?

When in conflict with others, do we cultivate a forgiving spirit? Do we look to that of God in ourselves and seek to address that of God in those with whom we disagree?

Responses:

- ❖ We reflected on some history among Iowa Friends, when there had been some religious revival going on. We were reminded that there are behaviors among Friends that could turn the focus away from our corporate worship that is to center on God’s Love. Conservative Friends traditionally value the corporate nature of Quakerism, thinking of ourselves as all pieces of a larger cloth, and there is extra concern these days that we take care not to disrupt such cohesiveness, that we are part of the specialness of Iowa Conservative Friends together. There can be pressure not to bring up conflict because of our strong focus on the group’s cohesion. On the other hand, there could be an extra level of trust that a conflict can in fact be handled without disconnecting because of the strong focus on the group.

- ❖ Attending worship frequently reminds us that we are in-and-of the meeting together, and that that which one of us may want from the meeting might not be what another Friend wants. When we miss times to worship together on a regular basis, we may miss hearing, seeing, or knowing the larger pattern or evolving character of the meeting that is created by all our experiences and through all Friends of the meeting. Attending worship frequently helps us understand how we are, together. When we misstep and start to be possessive of the meeting—how “my” meeting is or isn’t supposed to be—we might need to move into a place of forgiveness for Friends’ not wanting the same things. In that forgiveness, there can be a loosening of our grasp of what any of us thought of as “my meeting,” and we can remember that God and Love are the center of our relationships and our meetings, not our individual desires set apart from one another.
- ❖ The questions about harmony within the meeting are particularly salient for us since two members and one long-time attender have fairly recently stepped away. We know our small size makes it difficult for people to find Friends who are like them, but if we are rooted in the Vine, genuine relationships should arise out of the Spirit. We are reminded that we don’t come to Meeting simply to find a group of like-minded people, but rather we seek to know and be faithful to God. We do need to speak out more often and more clearly about our faith experiences, including our fears, doubts, and failings. And listen carefully.
- ❖ The relationship that is uniquely Quaker is the one that is about faithfulness. You are my Friends if you do whatsoever I command to you. “How has the Spirit dealt with thee since we last met?” and “What is thy teaching for us this day?” are helpful questions to ask together every week. This sort of question is not included in our Queries.

Query 5 - Mutual Care

How do we respond to each other’s personal needs and difficulties in sensitive and useful ways? Do we encourage both men and women to share in caregiving?

What are we doing to welcome and draw members and attenders of all ages into the fellowship of the meeting?

How do we help our children feel the loving care of the meeting? What do the children contribute to the meeting?

How do we keep in touch with inactive and distant members and attenders?

Responses:

- ❖ As an aging meeting, we are very conscious of giving and receiving care. Some members feel comfortable asking for help and express their gratitude to those helpers. Other members are less enthusiastic about being helped. We go gently as we give rides and bring food. Both givers and receivers have reached a good balance and seem to be more comfortable in their roles. We are grateful for all the helpers here.
- ❖ We wonder whether we share similar expectations. It is not something we tend to talk about. There are some who attended for a while and no longer do. We wonder what their expectations were. Do we need to talk about the expectations we have and bring to the meeting?
- ❖ Do we have a sense or memory of being loved in meeting? How do we let people know that they are valued and loved? Recognizing a gift or a potential and asking someone to serve in a way that the

person has not realized that they could serve is a possible way to communicate that and to help that person grow into his/her potential. So, we need to invite people to take on responsibilities for the sake of that person and the community. We need to be aware of our giving potential and to “give thanks for everything and take nothing for granted.

Query 6 – Education

How can we most effectively foster a spirit of inquiry and a loving and understanding attitude toward life?

What effort are we making to become better acquainted with the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, our Judeo-Christian heritage, the history and principles of Friends, and the contributions of other religions and philosophies to our spiritual heritage?

In what ways can we encourage an educational process that is consistent with the values Friends cherish? How do gender based expectations affect the goals we set and the way we learn?

Do we take an active and supportive interest in schools, libraries and other educational resources in our communities and elsewhere?

How do we prepare ourselves and our children to play active roles in a changing world?

Responses:

- ❖ We learn from our direct experience of situations that surprise us and on which we later reflect; from interacting with people from backgrounds that are quite different from our own; and from turning to nontraditional literature, media, and other sources of information. The Light shows us parts of humanity that we normally cannot see or seldom consider. For example, some of us have learned from the movement for Black lives; the nonviolent protests at Standing Rock; the solidarity work in support of undocumented immigrants. Without personal, direct relationship with people who participated in these significant historic actions, our education would be limited to whatever the mainstream media might convey. But our friends of color, and our contacts within the indigenous community, teach us and educate us not just about what happened but also what a just, inclusive community could be like.
- ❖ Those of us fortunate to attend Scattergood Friends School received an amazing education. We learned how to live and work in community, because that was how we actually lived at the school. We had to struggle with community problems, come up with solutions, and then implement them. We learned the tools to prepare us to be lifelong learners and community leaders.
- ❖ Quaker Voluntary Service provides opportunities for young people to learn to live in community and work on social justice issues. Quaker publications like *Pendle Hill Pamphlets* and *Friends Journal* are helpful educational sources. The relatively new QuakerSpeak videos are not only well done, but are in a format that might be more likely to reach young people.

Query 7 – Home and Family

How can we make our homes places of love and hospitality?

What different expectations do we hold for women and men, boys and girls? How can we bring more equality into our relationships?

How do we develop and maintain lines of communication?

In what ways do we share our deepest experiences, struggles, concerns and beliefs with our children and others, yet encourage them to develop their potential as the Spirit leads them?

What place do we make in our daily lives for meditation, spiritual renewal and reading of inspiring literature, such as the Bible?

How does our meeting support families of all kinds?

Responses:

- ❖ We are aware that these Queries we are addressing are based on the assumption that those responding grew up in or are living in Quaker homes; many of us responding today are living in the Center (Community Corrections Center of Lincoln), an institution quite different from a regular home. For those of us living at the Center, it does not seem like home as there are different energies there and a lack of respect for others. We want our homes to reflect peace and love; we do not find this at the Center and we have no control over what others do there.
- ❖ We do have control over our own attitudes and actions. We would like to lead the younger generation into better ways of life including gender equality. Someone shared that his mother used to share stories of her life that made him angry, but he's beginning now to have some forgiveness in his heart. Many want to share the stories of struggles of the past with their children, so that their future will be better; we hope the children can overcome stereotypes. We teach our children as we grow, hoping they do not make our mistakes. One person shared the embarrassment he experienced in having to teach his children about white racism, about how to act in the face of police violence and that we still have to teach this after all these years.
- ❖ We are living in a very violent world. We know that White Privilege means that this violence affects us in different ways and at different levels. The lack of racial equality is evident in the varied responses that come as we experience or witness racist behaviors.
- ❖ Though none of us are living with children at this time, we all need to nurture ourselves as well as each other. It is good when we can visit each other in our homes; that there are a variety of kinds of family, all needing nurture and safety. Home for all of us is somewhere we can feel safe; it may not be an actual place; it may be time with a friend or alone. We agree that home is where the heart is; if my heart is with me, then I am at home.

Query 8 - Personal Responsibility

How do we center our lives in the awareness of God the Spirit, so that all things may take their rightful places?

How do we structure our individual lives in order to keep them uncluttered with things and activities? How does Meeting help us examine our personal lives for simplicity?

Do we choose recreational activities which foster mental, physical and spiritual health?

How are our lives affected by tobacco, alcohol and drug use? What can we do to deal with problems resulting from their use? What can we do to recognize and deal with unhealthy ways we treat ourselves?

How do we ensure that we act with fairness and integrity?

Are we sensitive to our own use of language which may be offensive or oppressive to others?

Responses:

- ❖ We feel that we personally need some quiet space in our lives to nurture a relationship with God, or even awareness of God's existence. We tend to clutter our own lives with news, social media, emails. One spiritual practice is to take advantage of moments of waiting that are imposed on us in the course of daily living: time while the coffee is brewing or the bread is toasting. We need to balance de-cluttering with maintaining a healthy social life. One member who has recently moved into an assisted living community feels unduly pressured to join community activities. Another feels annoyed by overly social work colleagues. Screen time is both sedentary and distracting from the Spirit. We know we should be informed, and there is a place for screen-based entertainment, but we don't need to go overboard, we need to find a balance. One Friend wondered if we are upside down in considering how we can cut back on things here and there to make time for the Spirit. That may be misinterpreting the Thomas Kelly quote at the beginning of the advice, about "living life from the Center. "
- ❖ We sense that living from the Center means finding balance and finding balance in many ways was a theme of this sharing. Some of us are blessed with unstructured time which seems to more easily allow for spiritual growth. And at the same time, we appreciate Thomas Kelly's wisdom that the spiritual life takes no time while it occupies all of our time. What is the meaning of time and how we balance it?
- ❖ Many of us struggle with keeping a balance in honoring both respect for self with respect for others. Honesty in our communications with others sometimes needs to be balanced with consideration for their perspectives. Often we can be more open and honest with those we know well, while we are more circumspect with strangers.
- ❖ Balance involves finding a place where one is 'at home,' and it is our responsibility to find that place within ourselves. Some of us know that much inner housecleaning must be done before that home place is comfortable. Integrity for us means being one's true self, speaking one's own truth, from one's own experience. This means not judging others and using the opportunity that reflecting on Queries gives us to look at ourselves.

- ❖ Taking a longer view and being in the present challenge us. Looking forward to what will happen and savoring the now — both valued.

Query 9 – Civic Responsibility

What conflicts do we perceive between the laws of the State and our religious convictions? How do we resolve those conflicts in our lives? In what ways do we assume responsibility for the government of our community, state, nation and world?

How do we share our convictions with others? Do we express our opinions with courage, yet with love, mindful of the Divine Spirit within everyone?

How do we maintain our integrity when we find ourselves in a position of power? How do we respond when we feel powerless? Do we really respect and help those we seek to serve?

Are we careful to reach our decisions through prayer and strengthen our actions with worship? Are we open to Divine leadings?

Responses:

- ❖ We have a long history of good intentions regarding social justice issues. The Quaker boarding schools for Indigenous children in which we tried to “civilize” these children is one example. The idea of the penitentiary as a more humane and spiritual way to deal with those who broke the laws of the land is another example. Attempts at humane treatment of the mentally ill is another. We acknowledge with humility that we are learners and we recognize that some of the ways we have tried to address wrongs were well intentioned, but still not right. We hope to have the courage to continue efforts to move toward a more just society.
- ❖ We feel a strong sense of responsibility to vote and to communicate with those we elect to serve us at various levels of government. We value the model John Woolman gave us in his dialoguing respectfully with slave owners regarding the injustice of slavery. We practice praising our elected leaders when we feel that their words and votes are just. We recognize the wrong of current laws that keep many who are able to contribute in a positive way to society from voting. We realize the need to take into account a wide variety of life experiences, rather than seeing only through the lens of our own experience.
- ❖ We realize the importance of integrity and, when we are in positions of power or responsibility, acting from a spirit of justice and fairness. Another aspect of that integrity is to stay true to ourselves in our speech, especially when we are aware of potential harm to those with less power. Being a mediator can require strong integrity and courage.
- ❖ People of faith can be bridge-builders. Are we called to this work? How can we not vilify others while clearly and strongly speaking our Truth? As Gandhi stated, “It has always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honored by the humiliation of their fellow beings.” Can we spend our energy in prayer for those with whom we strongly disagree? Truly respecting those we seek to serve includes letting ourselves be followers to support the development of leadership in marginalized groups. It is important not to co-opt their leadership by always inserting ourselves into these roles.

Query 10 – Environmental Responsibility

What are we doing about our disproportionate use of the world's resources?

Do we see unreasonable exploitation in our relationship with the rest of creation? How can we nurture reverence and respect for life? How can we become more fully aware of our interdependent relationship with the rest of creation?

To what extent are we aware of all life and the role we play? What can we do in our own lives and communities to address environmental concerns?

Responses:

- ❖ There seems to be a spiritual disconnect between human awareness and what remains of the garden, our perception of paradise, and our place within it. Jesus says, “the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it.” So, in Meeting we discuss how we personally can open ourselves to perceiving and knowing that the natural world is ‘paradise on Earth.’

- ❖ We are pleased with the new leadership of the QEW and sought this year to support its ministry by sending handwritten, personal letters to every meeting in our yearly meeting to encourage more engagement in this witness. Our meeting contributes to QEW’s outreach. Members are encouraged to check out its newsletter, *Befriending Creation*. We considered whether we might be living in the sixth great period of extinction, this time created by humankind. Recent studies have shown that the population of flying insects has declined 50% - 85% in the last 50 years. This massive decline is affecting birds and pollinators. Our agricultural community loves using fungicides and pesticides, which kill organisms that live in the ground and serve literally as the root of the Web of Life. All of this comes about because of the evolution of the West’s culture of consumption, which in turn contributes to climate change. We are seeing the precursor of what is coming at us in term of floods and droughts. It takes 30-40 years for methane and CO2 to come to equilibrium, so even if we cut off all of our excess production of these gasses, it will take 30-40 years for the climate to stop warming. AFSC and FCNL help us respond to the question of our disproportionate use of resources. QEW has a mini-grant (e.g. \$500) available to meetings for initiating small, local projects.We are grateful for the work of FCNL to influence national priorities. One resource for engaging more productively in the conversations about climate change is the book *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming, Toward a New Psychology of Climate Action* by Per Espen Stoknes.

Query 11 - Social and Economic Justice

How are we beneficiaries of inequity and exploitation? How are we victims of inequity and exploitation? In what ways can we address these problems?

What can we do to improve the conditions in our correctional institutions and to address the mental and social problems of those confined there?

How can we improve our understanding of those who are driven to violence by subjection to racial, economic or political injustice? In what ways do we oppose prejudice and injustice based on gender, sexual orientation, class, race, age, and physical, mental and emotional conditions? How would individuals benefit from a society that values everyone? How would society benefit?

Responses:

- ❖ When we attempt to answer how we as members of a Monthly Meeting are victims of inequity and exploitation, we are reminded by the voices and history of the region's indigenous peoples that the land upon which we live has undergone tremendous destructive alteration after being taken by militia and military force only four and five generations back. In less than 200 years this region between two rivers has lost a biological diversity that once equaled tropical rain forests and in terms of plants and animals is now more equal to a desert. That we are victims of inequity and exploitation, in part is due to the slow understanding of how we arrive at this moment, like awakening, opening our eyes, recognizing the very systems that we have inherited, engaged, and wrapped around ourselves, support and further the catastrophe that we see as American economics; the eminent domain of the super-rich. We acknowledge among ourselves that within this nation there is a disparate widening gap between the haves and have-nots, inequity between races, between the privileged and lower class, inequitable distribution of welfare.

- ❖ At this point in time, we are a very diverse group, some of us benefiting enormously from economic and political structures that have been part of our country throughout its history, while others of us have clearly been the victims of these same structures. One of us shared his story of being imprisoned for 14 years after filing a complaint of discrimination and subsequently being falsely charged with a crime. We were reminded of the suffering of children whose parents are incarcerated — both emotional and economic suffering. We were also reminded that when judges and prosecutors hold elective offices, they are subject to political pressure that may obstruct justice.

- ❖ We must recognize that, while some of us benefit from our political and economic structures and some of us suffer from these same structures, all of us are beneficiaries of the exploitation of the natural world. Our greed in this exploitation has already begun to cause suffering and more suffering lies ahead. We have a moral duty to cherish creation for all life in the future.

Query 12 - Peace and Nonviolence

What are we doing to educate ourselves and others about the causes of conflict in our own lives, our families and our meetings? Do we provide refuge and assistance, including advocacy, for spouses, children, or elderly persons who are victims of violence or neglect?

Do we recognize that we can be perpetrators as well as victims of violence? How do we deal with this? How can we support one another so that healing may take place?

What are we doing to understand the causes of war and violence and to work toward peaceful settlement of differences locally, nationally, and internationally? How do we support institutions and organizations that promote peace?

Do we faithfully maintain our testimony against preparation for and participation in war?

Responses:

- ❖ Although it is not always be true, we like the statement of aspiration at the beginning, about seeking “to live in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars”. That is how we can be real, authentic, and peaceful. The “shoulds” within this document are not bad, but our real guidance comes from the deep well within. When we dwell there, all is well.
- ❖ We are aware of the pull to stay in our comfort zone, and we can stay in the bubble as long as we need it. Carry the sword as long as we can. We shouldn’t jump into the water if we don’t know how to swim, but nourished by the power of God we can jump in the water, let the pain of the world into our awareness and respond to it with love. But staying there is sacrificing something huge. Like the rich man who came to Jesus saying he had done everything right all his life but wanted the kingdom of heaven, but wasn’t ready to jump in. He saw what he was sacrificing by not jumping in, and sadly went away. We can sympathize with this young rich man who was not ready yet. We believe the Guide Within walked away with him and continued to speak to him. And the Guide continues to speak to us even though we fall short.
- ❖ The Alternatives to Violence Project is one way we hope to spread the message of nonviolence and create a little more peace in the world. A Friend testified to his own experience of having benefited from conflict avoidance techniques he learned in AVP... Today we are challenged by growing intolerance in political discourse. We see more and more our neighbors dismissing any opinion not their own as wrong. Friends have varying views on peace and the necessity of military defense. Each of us brings what Light we have to the gathering, and together our Light is made stronger. George Fox is said to have advised William Penn to lay down his sword when he was ready to lay it down. By example, we try to lead others to the Light.