

Bellingham Friends Meeting State of Society Report 2015

Amidst growth, deepening community, and spiritual seeking, Bellingham Friends experienced profound blessings and challenges in 2015. We explored our Quaker roots, tested our commitment to and understanding of Quaker process, added new members and attenders, and explored the complexities of purchasing a Meetinghouse. While the gift of finding a possible physical home for our worshipping community brought valuable lessons, it also tried our ability to fully live our commitment to simplicity, unity, and community. The year's end found us still on the road to better understanding of the need to consistently and faithfully "mind the Light."

In the first part of 2015, we concluded a team-taught series of workshops begun the year before, based on the *Quakerism: Experience It!* curriculum created by Elaine Crauderueff and adapted by Steve Smith. Several Bellingham Friends took turns as facilitators, many enriched the sessions by researching famous Friends and giving brief presentations, and the programs inspired rich discussion.

The Social and Environmental Concerns Committee supported Friends' leadings to work for peace and justice, which included: supporting the local Racial Justice Coalition; marching with our banner in the annual Pride Parade; hosting the AFSC exhibit, "39 Questions for White People," participating in Alternatives to Violence Project trainings; lobbying with FCNL's Advocacy Team here.

In July, we were blessed and challenged by the possibility of purchasing a former church, now known as the Bell Tower Studios building. Our Meeting agreed to make an offer with a four-month contingency contract that stipulated reaching unity on the purchase, as well as determining financial feasibility. Our ad hoc exploratory committee, with outstanding dedication and skill, researched many complex questions around practical considerations. Their many hours of work included initiating an ambitious capital campaign for the Meetinghouse, to which many pledged generously. Friends also continued the faithful regular financial support that funds our Meeting.

The Meeting as a whole labored together regarding the Bell Tower Studios building, with concerns including whether we were Spirit-led to undertake Meetinghouse ownership, whether this was the right time and the right building, and if so, were we ready for the necessary landlord and other responsibilities. Throughout this sometimes tumultuous process, Friends reiterated confidence in our community to grow from the experience, and in our love and commitment to one another. However, the scope of the endeavor combined with the four-month time constraint (which ended in November) proved very trying, and some misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and frustration resulted. Nonetheless, by year's end, Ministry and Counsel had begun creating opportunities for us to continue corporate learning and healing through worship, with the help of trusted facilitators from other Meetings in the Quarter. Despite the difficulty of the process, many Friends remain hopeful that we will emerge stronger and more ready to address whatever opportunities unfold in the future.

Friends also came together in many wonderful ways this year. Our Outreach and Welcoming Group sponsored after-worship programs that fostered connection and participation, including poetry sharing and get-acquainted games. There has been increased fellowship at weekly and midweek worship. The Meeting has been enriched by two new members and a transfer of membership. Average weekly attendance increased by about one person, to 27.5. Our largest Meeting brought 46 Friends to worship in June. This increased participation sometimes stressed our Hospitality Committee, and we are seeking ways to share that work more equitably. Our first overnight retreat in several years explored lessons for adults in deepening our spirituality, and included a lively children's program.

Also this year, Friends agreed to invest in our regular Children's Program by hiring a dedicated childcare provider. This creative, loving individual supports our families with children and is a welcome part of our community. We hope as we build the program, more children and teens will come.

Bellingham Friends also celebrated the fruition of six wonderful years since the Lopez Island Worship Group became a preparatory meeting under our care. We are delighted that our beloved Lopez Friends are now seeking Quarterly Meeting approval to become a monthly Meeting!