

Bellingham Friends Meeting State of Society Report for 2019

We respectfully acknowledge that this Meeting gathers in the traditional, sovereign territory of Indigenous Coast Salish peoples including the Lummi and Nooksack who have cared for these lands and waters since time immemorial and continue to do so today. Their presence is imbued in these mountains, valleys, waterways, and shorelines. May we honor the original stewards of this place and participate in the care and protection of our shared home

This has been a difficult year for Bellingham Friends Meeting (BFM). We have been challenged to live into what it means to be a community and to be present for each other in the midst of hurt, fear, anger, and sadness, while also sharing joys, unity, support, and laughter. We have made major shifts and also struggled with not changing quickly enough. Through it all, we continue to come together and to show up.

Many of the difficult emotions during this year are related to one of our regular attenders taking a plea bargain for lowest level sexual offender, which had a profound effect on him and his wife (a member of BFM). They received support and confidentiality from Friends who knew about his case (mostly but not exclusively members of Ministry and Counsel) throughout his legal ordeal. The question of sex offender status among attenders, as well as the confidentiality afforded the family, has caused deep consternation, pain, and a sense of betrayal among Friends. Some of the many survivors of assault and abuse in our Meeting have been challenged to feel safe worshipping in our midst. Other Friends are concerned that we have not given enough support to the person convicted and his family, and indeed have hurt them. We ask ourselves, How can we ensure that our Meeting feels safe for each of us? How can we balance privacy needs with the need of all for an open, trusting community? How can we appreciate that each of us carries the Divine within, even as each of us is fallible? How can we become a more loving community?

The Meeting has responded to these concerns in several ways. A support group for survivors was created and we are setting up listening groups for Friends to process their experiences together. A Safe Quaker Community Ad Hoc Committee was formed in May with a charge from the Meeting to revise and improve the policy for discerning whether and how to include sex offenders in BFM. The committee was asked to make recommendations about finding peace and safety for the whole meeting. They solicited help from University Meeting Friends, Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services of Bellingham, and our own Children's Program and Pastoral Care committees. Several members of our Children's Program facilitator team have received the Stewards of Children training from Brigid Collins House. Despite the harm Bellingham Friends have experienced, individually and collectively, from this excruciating topic, every time new questions and problems have emerged, the committee has steadily worked to use that input to improve our understanding and policies about the possible attendance of sex offenders at our Meeting. We continue to bring our faith to bear, and to move toward greater transparency, healing, and reconciliation.

As a result of these unresolved concerns, some members and regular attenders have left Meeting. Our average attendance has declined by almost 5 people from last year (a 17 percent decrease from 28.8 to 23.9). We miss Friends who no longer attend, and we feel deeply grieved about these losses. For some, the subject of sex offenders wanting to be part of our community has brought up horrible memories of abuse; for others, it's grief because we've lost people from Meeting who we care about; for others, it's anger about how people have failed the Meeting or individuals within the Meeting; others feel hurt or betrayed by other Friends. We

don't want to simply say that it's been tough, but it's good now. We honor our real feelings of sorrow and other difficult emotions.

We ask ourselves, how do we heal the anger, hurt, loss, and grief, particularly as it relates to the love we have for each other? How do we deal with concerns about violating trust, or how we've failed those who have left? Given those failures, what do we do, those of us who are still here, to heal? To bring back a sense of wholeness? We have some uncomfortable work ahead.

And yet, Friends continue to show up and are committed to finding a way forward, whether it's being on a committee, showing up for worship or Meeting for Worship for Business (MfWfB), seeking unity, or just being part of this community. One friend expressed their desire to build something in concert with other Friends, rooted in ethics, consistency, faith, love, and healing. It is in the conversations and the confrontations that we can also see the true seeking of Light and Love. We're doing the best we can; it takes heart, intellect, and the guidance of the Divine Spirit. In addition, some Friends in our Meeting have taken an active role in the wider Quaker community, one by serving on the QEW Steering Committee and publishing in Western Friend and Friends Journal, and another who published a novel distributed by FGC about a young Quaker's journey in the 1940s.

The loss of many attenders naturally also created gaps in our committees and other responsibilities. Thankfully, Friends stepped forward, sometimes it seemed almost like magic, to fulfill the most urgently needed responsibilities. We were blessed to keep a full slate of committees throughout this very difficult year. However, there are concerns that some Friends are burdened with too many tasks. Because of the lower attendance and our desire to focus on these issues, BFM restructured our committees. Friends laid down our Ministry and Counsel committee, creating instead two committees: Worship and Ministry, to nurture the spiritual growth and health of the Meeting as a whole, and Pastoral Care, to care for the individuals who make up our community. In order to do so, Friends temporarily laid down our Outreach and Welcoming Committee and created an Outreach and Welcoming Coordinator position. We also created the Safe Quaker Community Ad Hoc Committee.

The Social and Environmental Concerns committee has been active this past year. They organized a group of people to attend and voice concerns about racist actions in Sedro-Woolley; the Mayor of Sedro-Woolley has since held a Sensitivity Training for all city staff members in response. A long process by several people from Meeting has resulted in a Land Acknowledgement Statement, which was recently seasoned and accepted by Meeting. Thanks to the work of the SEC committee, the meeting has continued to financially support the work of many local organizations with our "Concerns of the Month."

The Pastoral Care Committee has continued the work of clarifying their role in the community. They have organized care for those who have been sick or needed extra support after surgery. They have also reached out to those who have left the meeting. Worship and Ministry has continued to organize second-hour programs that engage the community, and which have good attendance, often similar in numbers to attendance at Meeting for Worship. Many Friends expressed gratitude especially for MfWfB, which regularly is well-attended. One Friend expressed that our MfWfB is one of their favorite times of the month at BFM, because we all have a chance to discern who we are and where we are going. Friends continue to show up also for a monthly Spirit Study Group, a monthly Book Group, and a monthly Earthcare group.

We continue our search for a new Meeting space. The Meetinghouse Committee has explored possibilities of land and building purchase and renting space. BFM has not come to clearness on any of the properties for purchase and some potential rental spots have fallen through. The Finance Committee reports that it was a steady year of expense and income, and through careful stewardship of a generous bequest, our Meetinghouse fund grew. As of this writing, we are moving forward with negotiations for renting a local events facility. We are hopeful that way will open for The Majestic to become a location where we can grow and become a more vital and vibrant part of the Bellingham community, carrying out George Fox's encouragement to "be patterns, be examples in all countries, places . . . wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone."