

Regional gatherings: history, rationale, and larger context of the project

The movement to develop regional gatherings has a history in our quarter, and a larger rationale rooted in the history of our society and the conditions of our time. Below an account of these is organized into four topics: recent history, Quaker tradition, our present situation, and a way forward.

Recent history:

Our present encounter with the proposal to experiment with regional gatherings is the fourth in the past two decades, each of these drawn to the benefits of neighborhood gatherings for fellowship, witness, and the nurture of our spiritual life. In 1996 in a review of “the future of College Park Quarterly Meeting” we posed the following queries to our meetings: would Friends like more regional gatherings? Should we try dividing winter quarter into 3 or 4 parts? A 2003 “cluster meeting” proposal saw such gatherings as “opportunities to get to know one another and learn how Spirit is working among other groups of Friends” and it charted seven different “neighborhoods” in the Quarter where such gatherings might take place. Friends imagined also that we might substitute such gatherings for our winter quarter, enabling more Friends outside the bay area to attend a January event without facing the problems of time and distance that a one-day event there posed. In 2011 a version of this proposal was again brought to the Quarter, and most recently, in 2018, a group was formed to explore and encourage this experiment --and we are now in the midst of that exploration. During this time, a small number of meetings have hosted neighborhood gatherings but the pattern has not yet become established. Nevertheless, this recurring attention over the years suggests there may be something important we are looking for, something missing in our present pattern of monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. We have for some time been aware of the small percentage of our meeting members and attenders who attend these larger gatherings.

Our tradition; how gatherings serve Friends’ ways

Our present pattern of monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings grew out of the experience of early Friends and was designed by Fox to address certain challenges of his time. The informal movement initiated in 1652 faced, by the 1660’s, increased persecution that threatened its survival. The crises included imprisonment of thousands, deaths, and increased conflict within worshipping groups. The newly formed organizations of meetings were, in addition to being occasions for worship, to provide aid to those in need, to address internal conflict, to deal with those not living in good order, to create patterns of life for communities in need of mutual support, and to form a common way of life over the long haul [shaping marriage practices and burials, for example.] Our times are different. We are not relying on our structures in the main to protect one another from imprisonment based on our religion, to raise money to support those persecuted by the government, to discipline disorderly walking to keep the face of Quakerism clear, or even to create and protect a counter-cultural life. We do attend to the spiritual growth of our members and respond to some current social issues through volunteer work, activism, and contributions. But, given the conditions of our time and place, perhaps there are other forms of organization that could be real instruments of spiritual nurture and prophetic living for us. It may be that regional gatherings answer some of the needs that contemporary Friends face.

Our present situation

The movement for regional gatherings is more than an effort to help us get to know the folks in our neighborhood. These small networks of monthly meetings may also provide an important opportunity for mutual support, challenge, and growth in the face of powerful issues before us. Our smaller monthly meetings often feel an isolation and fragility that connection with Friends outside may help remedy. And while monthly meetings are where we mostly live our Quakerism and put Friends ways into

practice, they also may become strained by habits and conflicts that weigh us down, that limit our sense of possibility, and that may undercut our courage to try out something new. Traveling Friends have historically brought this outsider refreshment and energy into monthly meetings, but this is little practiced today. Unfortunately, there is little connection at present between monthly meetings and the higher levels of our society—quarterly and yearly meetings. These upper two are mainly constituted by a minority of strongly interested Friends eager for the stimulation of others outside of their meetings, and for the larger scale that quarterly and yearly meetings provide. Those who participate in larger gatherings wish they could bring their local meeting Friends into participation, and those who stay at home have little sense of what they are missing.

Building forms for our present time

For these many reasons, the movement to experiment with regional gatherings seems wise and promising. Our tradition has created for us a framework of worship groups, monthly meetings, quarterly meetings, and yearly meetings. The pattern of small and widely separated meetings in the west has diluted the power of this system, and we have repeatedly confronted its limits at every level—in efforts to make vital connections, to enable travel, to create sites, to share costs, to limit environmental impacts, and so forth. Of the more than 1300 members in our yearly meeting—and additionally a large number of attenders—our annual gatherings bring together a few hundred. Our quarterly meeting—with 800 or so members and many attenders—normally hosts at its gatherings just over a hundred Friends. Most of our monthly meetings are islands of self-constituted Quakerism lacking [but for a small number of individuals] active interest in, or familiarity with, Friends outside of the monthly meeting. Quakerism so constrained becomes insular, subject to dilution, and lacking in the stimulation of other meeting's ways, discoveries, and spiritual vitality. Yet overcoming this to attend larger gatherings often requires travel for many hours, and at environmental cost. Our Quaker communities need forms sensitive to these costs and conditions. The proposal of the creation of patterns of regional meetings may address a number of these pressing needs and their underlying opportunities for revitalization. They are more likely to draw Friends presently not attending other gatherings because, for example:

- a- regional gatherings are low cost and thus more inclusive, reducing the effect of wealth differentials that impact our Quarterly meeting and especially Yearly Meeting attendance;
- b- regional gatherings open more opportunity for discussion of common local issues and meeting responses—violence, homelessness, police weapons, and so on; and
- c- regional gatherings have less impact on the environment, require less travel, often use a meeting's own facilities, and require little organization.

Recent regional gatherings, for many of these reasons, have been well attended and successful, with plans for gatherings again next year in these neighborhoods. This is an opportunity for creating a new tradition, a new form of gathering, but it will take experimentation and the persistence to build and evaluate this new pattern over time. Our Quarterly Meeting community of Friends might well find new nourishment and a refreshed sense of community if it incorporated this new level of regional meetings into our present practice. Such community networks are likely to be increasingly important in the years ahead.

July 2019, Jim Anderson, Chico Friends Meeting, member of Ad-Hoc Committee on Regional Gatherings and CPQM Ministry and Oversight Committee