Lessons from Thriving Meetings

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November 2018

(This is a mid-process report and an invitation into a "roll-up-your-sleeves conversation.")

New Life and energy are rising in many meetings in New England and beyond. A few meetings are so far along on the renewal journey, that they are noticeably more vibrant and alive. Their most obvious and dramatic attribute is robust attendance. Overcrowding at Meeting for Worship is even named as a problem in a recent State of Society report by one of these meetings. A key piece of our stewardship for the Quaker movement at this moment is looking more closely at how and why these meetings are thriving. Even a preliminary and informal study of these meetings can highlight similarities among them and point toward specific practices other meetings might consider.

The purpose of a Quaker Meeting, the "deep why" motivating our search for renewal, is to be a more and more open conduit for Divine Love coming into the world through ourselves and our lives. The growing attendance figures, and even conditions of vibrancy and thriving, are by-products of deeper Life-giving forces at work. We have often been confusing outward indications with deep causal factors driving the renewal process. The way to increase attendance is not to aim to do that directly, but instead, to encourage these Life-giving forces. The core of this endeavor involves seeding significant changes in our Quaker culture, local meeting by local meeting. But, even a condition of thriving is still not our ultimate goal. Our ultimate goal is faithfulness. As Quakers we know this happens most fully and most effectively in our gathered condition, as a worshipping and witnessing circle of Friends.

Spiritual and Social Markers in Thriving Meetings

Using a Bright Spot analysis, we can look to the comparatively rare cases of thriving meetings for clues. Jerry Sternin popularized this mode of research while studying malnutrition in Vietnam in 1990. He used this term to describe families that had healthy, robust children while all around them were malnourished families struggling to survive. Two thriving meetings in New England, Mount Toby and Providence Meetings, hold keys to the renewal dynamic.

Visiting and worshipping with Friends at Providence and Mt. Toby Meetings in October 2017, revealed eleven distinct parallels between them.

1. Some Friends anchored worship at least 10 minutes, and maybe quite a bit longer, before the stated start time.

2. At the rise of meeting, both communities took time for each Friend to say their name.

3. Coffee hour had several choices of food. Friends lingered. The joy in connection was palpable and the room buzzed with energy.

4. The demographic profile of the worshippers had many Friends in each decade of life.

5. Worship was deep and centered. At Mt. Toby I experienced it as "pin drop quiet." At Providence, worship continued in a deep, centered place even though happy sounds from the children downstairs drifted up to us.

6. Each meeting enjoyed unusually warm social ties. Friends at both meetings volunteered that they see each other during the week.

7. Strong engagement in the community beyond their meetinghouses was evident.

8. Each meeting was self-aware of both their new growth and energy and was clear-eyed about the challenges growth brings.

9. Each meeting had nimble and responsive leadership. They were "quick to the helm" --embracing questions and ready to take action quickly.

10. Both meetings seemed to have a strong community of seasoned Friends. At Mount Toby, Friends were refreshingly explicit about their purpose. One Friend summed it up as, " 'Faithfulness' is said and sought!"

11. Within the last five years, each meeting confronted and successfully negotiated a significant concern/challenge that involved the whole meeting. The seeds of renewal may have come from the response to these concerns/challenges.

These factors combine **strong eldership (anchoring and guidance by seasoned Friends)** and a vibrant sense of **wholeness in their meeting community** that set these meetings apart. I found evidence of strong eldership in the care of worship and the intentional anchoring before the stated start time. The depth and clarity of the silence signaled the patient development of a capacity for corporate worship that I take to be another mark of the work of elders. The look and feel of the gathered community in each meeting immediately caught my attention and admiration. There was a remarkable amount of joy and delight in seeing each other. Without being prompted, Friends at both Mt. Toby and Providence Meetings named seeing each other during the week as a factor that set their meetings apart. They have organized their personal lives to serve on anchor and support committees during the week and to participate in other witness and service activities that pull small clusters together to do the work of the meeting between Sundays.

Eldership and wholeness in community work in concert to address one crucial issue that otherwise prevents meetings from thriving. The renewal dynamic appears to work by mitigating the impact of the individualism rife in our secular society. Individualism effectively erects barriers to the flow of Spirit within a Friend and between and among Friends. The culture change inferred from these case studies acts to lower these barriers and restore the kind of bold engagement of God in Quaker community that early Friends recount.

So, the dynamic underlying this renewal process isn't a remarkable secret! It is, rather, a fuller and more deeply rooted embrace of our Friends tradition. The elders keep the meeting on the Quaker track, spiritually and socially. The heightened level of wholeness among the Friends

effectively allows the Light to circulate with less resistance and fewer obstructions. A spiritual intimacy develops that can transform a meeting into a much more conductive social web through which Spirit can circulate freely. For meetings in hope of renewal, this journey will amount to a culture shift, yes, but it will be a journey of coming home in profound ways.

Practices to Build the Wholeness in Community

Add Invitation to Information About our Meeting

We re-organized our bulletin boards with the intention to help newcomers know how to get involved. We are catalyzing ministry involvement by consistently naming Friends to contact to join in.

Remove Obstacles to Participation

We invested in high chairs for our toddlers. We continued our policy of offering childcare for meetings and social gatherings. We installed a new hearing assistance system and are considering installing a small elevator.

"Every Friend Introductions" at the Rise of Meeting

We heard singling out newcomers for introduction was off-putting. Established Friends appreciate the reminder of names, too! We tried Every Friend Introductions for several weeks and decided to make it our practice. Both Mt. Toby and Providence Friends use this practice.

Tell the Story of Our Meeting in Pictures

We evaluated the images in our social room. They included a picture of three elderly Friends in bonnets who had roles in *Down to the Sea in Ships*, a film from 1922. We had no personal connection to these women as it turned out! We retired several pictures to less visible locations in the meetinghouse. We decided, instead, to capture the Life in our meeting through rotating pictorial displays with short captions. These pictures have been very well received!

Linger Longer in Social Moments

There is a certain necessary investment of time in order to have a vibrant community. We created and extended moments of connection at coffee hour and at other times. We increased the offerings at Coffee Hour and provided soup, bread and salad before Meeting for Business on Sundays. Our goal was to set the stage for spiritual intimacy by first knowing each other in the events of our daily lives.

Labor with Friends who issue the Mighty No

Systematic conflict avoidance creates an unwelcoming culture and is all too common among Friends. One typical manifestation of this is a Friend issuing "the Mighty No" in meeting for business and the meeting knuckling under without further discernment such that the proposal is banished to the sidelines. This does an extreme disservice to both the Friend who works his or her will against the group and to the body of the meeting. Would-be new Friends are put on notice that their voices may not be heard in favor of keeping a superficial calm.

We began with gentle but concerted efforts to circle back to some "banished" proposals to see if progress could be made. One such suggestion was around displaying an FCNL *Love Thy*

Neighbor No Exceptions sign on our grounds. We now have the sign and a Working Group has been named to explore its placement.

Practices to Encourage Eldership

Pray, Gather, and Hope

We began by taking our concerns and hopes for our meeting into the Light. We returned again and again in prayer lifting up our love and care for our meeting.

Use Distinctly Quaker Messaging

Intentionally phrase things using distinctly Quaker terms and concepts. We planted seeds of ideas about "knowing each other in the things that endure" or "ordering our lives" as guided by the Light. Words create a space for meaning. By shifting our vocabulary, we began to move toward functioning as what Diana Butler Bass calls a Guild for Spiritual Practice.

Make a Space for Explicit Conversations about Our Spiritual and Social Condition

We used our annual State of Society gatherings to create a space for these deeper conversations. This year's queries include:

> "Our meeting community did a lot of work in the process of reimagining our meeting structure.
> How has doing this work changed us, individually and corporately?
> What have we learned from this process?
>
> "Is the meeting a place where you feel comfortable bringing your questions, yearnings, struggles, and experiences of the Presence?
>
> How has the meeting helped this spiritual intimacy, and what might the meeting do to kindle more?"

Share Our Story of Faith

We took chances and found small ways to reveal more and more about our experience as regular people seeking a faithful path using the distinctly Quaker mode of listening, clearness committees, discernment, etc.

Adjust the Tone of Welcome Material

Frame the Quaker journey for newcomers as explicitly dynamic, engaging, and done in community.

Anchor Worship

Following the examples of Mt. Toby and Providence Meetings, we encouraged a few Friends to begin worship at least 10 minutes early to give the worship a solid grounding into which arriving Friends can settle.

Sit closer together in the meeting room.

The pattern had been to disperse evenly throughout a large meeting room. An elder at Wellesley Meeting has been advocating for this simple change as a way to deepen our worship through physical proximity. The meeting formed the Bench Action Group to carry this work

initiating different configurations of benches. Some benches were removed to open space and to reduce the number of possible seats.

Explore adding lap blankets to the worship room

We were mindful of physical comfort during worship so that those needs don't become a distraction. We added lap blankets to the cushions we already have available for worshippers.

Explore an Open Spiritual Nurture Group

We are beginning a small spiritual growth group designed to welcome Friends new to the Quaker journey. Meeting monthly, there will always be an opportunity to gather with other seekers in a small intimate group. It will combine some structure and substance with enough flexibility to allow time for questions.

Each meeting will begin with worship and a check-in lifting up where we sense the Presence is at work in our lives. We will explore different models of small spiritual growth groups including Daphne Clement's writing exercises and Faithfulness Groups from the Nurturing Worship, Faith and Faithfulness program created by Marcelle Martin.

Renewal is within Reach

Thriving in the Light, together, is our natural condition. We need only remove the barriers we ourselves have put into place and have the courage, faithfulness and tenacity to go where the Light leads us, together. Culture change can be seeded quite easily but incorporating these new ways into the daily life of a meeting is best done gradually and with a light touch. Gentleness and a spirit of invitation may calm a pushback against changes. Resistance that does surface must be thoughtfully acknowledged and addressed. It seems crucial that in confronting these objections, our tone is clear but also invitational and humble. We can imagine a balancing act of offering explicit hope of deeper connection with the Divine and spiritual practices to open ourselves to that Life and Power, all the while letting Friends resistant to growing in their faith to remain as they are. We need to explicitly normalize that a Spiritual Journey implies movement and that Ongoing Revelation and divine guidance call forth changes in our inner beings and our outer lifeways.

We have the first inklings of what makes these thriving meetings different and why these aspects are significant as they open the way for culture change that releases the Light to move among us unfettered. But <u>how</u> did these newcomers hear about the thriving meetings and find their way to worship? Social media may have played a role at the individual level. We do know Mt. Toby and Providence Friends are visible and engaged in their communities in witness and service organized by the meetings. The most probable explanation, at this point, is plain vanilla person-to-person transmission either by word of mouth or personal social media. When people experience the ordinary miracle of the Presence at work in their hearts and sense Divine Love at work in their lives calling them to build the Beloved Community, we do, indeed, have Good News to share!