

Reflections by David Hadley Finke after reading MCGM State of Society Reports, Aug. 6, 2011

(A.) *Functions and Cycles:*

States of Society Reports classically emerged from a collective answering of queries, the most basic of which was "How doth Truth fare among you?" When done best, these are radically honest, not sugar-coated self-congratulation. We are being searched by God, thereby to grow in Grace as we submit to Our Guide.

Many different styles have emerged in writing State of Society reports. I value that Chicago Monthly Meeting follows standard queries which Western YM expects to be addressed in each congregation: Seeing their answers over a 4-year period gave a distinct sense of the challenges, the ups and downs, through which Chicago Meeting has come. In ILYM we have had from our Ministry & Advancement committee a suggested set of queries by which Meetings may examine their spiritual state, and I strongly commend them to those Meetings that may not yet have used them.

Illustrating the "ups and downs," I think I may have quoted in a line from Oak Park's SofS, about "frustration and exhaustion" -- commending you for the frankness. We must start with Truth, open to all its aspects, if we are to benefit from God's Guidance.

The reports cover a range between outward activities and inward spiritual state. I cringe when I read something that's like a "Christmas Letter" -- e.g., in January we went on this vacation, in February we saw these relatives, in March Susie got sick, in April we went to Joe's first track meet, in May Lucy went to her class reunion.... you get the picture. It's all outward, and comes across as trivial. However, my theology is strongly Judeo-Christian, in which our material creation (from the Genesis myth) is,

each day, pronounced “Good!” by God. I am wary of an overly-spiritualized withdrawal from engagement with the world.

(B.) *The usual, common themes:*

Illustrating the organic nature of our Life Together, all of the reports cover, one way or another and in different proportions, some common, predictable elements:

- Births, deaths, marriages, membership changes, Friends moving in and moving away.
- The role of children (even if there currently are none) was invariably mentioned; happily, they seem to be on the increase in most Meetings.
- The anomaly of too few Friends (in a “core”) doing too many of the tasks is often mentioned -- with some Meetings questioning whether they need so many different nominated positions.
- Property and financial concerns, which may be more overt when a Meeting owns its own building -- sometimes a mixed blessing. (I took this occasion also to editorialize about the rightness of being concerned with material as well as spiritual matters -- part of my “creation theology.”)

(C.) *The Central Elements:*

(1.) **The Worship Experience**

This is the core of the Life of our Meetings. It covers both our classic Sunday-morning hour of worship, and our gathering worshipfully to attend to business. Each Meeting commented on how that is going, how vital it is in our being Quakers. The overall sense is that our life of Worship is satisfying, nurturing, and essential.

(2.) **Care for Each Other**

There were a number of aspects and expressions of this:

- We “bear one another’s burdens.” Pastoral care, some formally organized, other (just as valuable) arising spontaneously and widely shared among members.
- Being aware of and welcoming new visitors, and integrating newcomers into the broader life of our Meetings.
- Social events -- we do more than worship together. There is a place for intentional fun in our Life Together.
- Adult Religious Education. It has many forms: regular Friendly Bible Study; forums and common reading; workshops and retreats, sometimes with outside facilitators and resources.
- Recognizing and processing conflict. This can be interpersonal, but also covers a whole Meeting struggling and questioning who they are, how well they’re doing, where they should be going, attempting to clarify mission and reorganization. CMM was most explicit about this. Because I could read a number of years together, I can see the progress and growth that emerged from a period of real uncertainty. I mention this to be illustrative of the value of having such self-examination and accountability to broader bodies.
- “In-reach” and “Outreach”: A number of Meetings mentioned the importance of both aspects, but some expressed ambivalence as to whether they were maintaining the right balance.

... which gives a segue’ to the next Element ...

(3.) **Witness in the Community**

This is most frequent on peace and justice issues, but also illustrates a basic compassion and humanitarian concern for our brothers and sisters beyond the Quaker fold. It covers expressions arising from homelessness, hunger, capital punishment, prison issues, militarism, and education (Chicago Friends School.) Some of this witness is purely Quaker, but most is in cooperation/coalition with other groups.

Friends, though small in numbers, have a benign and helpful influence in the larger world—a heritage entrusted to us, which we should humbly value and faithfully practice.

(4.) Relation with Other Bodies of Friends

Although by definition a SofS report is about one local group, it is a circle which exists surrounded by other and larger circles. Most of the commentary was about what Friends were doing in their monthly meeting or worship group.

And yet several of the reports described their connections with a MCGM, an “area meeting,” one or more yearly meetings, national (FUM, FGC, QEW, AFSC, FCNL) and international (FWCC) associations. Some individual Friends specialize and excel in their ministry in these broader venues. This is a vital part of our being Friends, and gatherings such as today give us an opportunity for looking at what we get from and can give to that part of The Life which is beyond our immediate circle.

Sent with Love, -DHF