



## Introduction

On Sunday, July 28, 2024, Friends gathered following Meeting for Worship to consider five questions on the topic of where we are as a Meeting. Fourteen Friends participated in person, two on Zoom, and one Friend answered the questions by email in advance of the forum. The questions and responses to them are located in the Appendix to this report.

This discussion had its genesis in the concerns expressed at the end of 2023 as they related to the Meeting's operating finances and its ability to conduct various aspects of its work through the committee structure typical of most Quaker meetings. Various "tweaks" had been implemented during 2023, such as a task list where individuals could choose a time and date to volunteer to accomplish one of tasks involved with having Meeting for Worship each Sunday. These changes have met with limited success.

The goal of this report is to provide fodder for additional discussion about the state of the Meeting and our future together as well as material for discussion within committees to consider what work should be continued or laid down and how we must adapt to the realities of modern society. Quakers have been faced with societal change throughout their existence when critical inflection points require action, and they have done so without altering the essence of their beliefs. We will discuss this report at a forum on September 22, 2024. Please read it thoroughly and come prepared to discuss it and possible ideas for next steps. We will not be reading this report on September 22, we will hopefully be stimulating actions that can permit the Meeting to move forward in its development.

The cover of this report is a word cloud created from the responses to the questions posed in the forum. What started as almost 900 words was reduced to approximately 65 words after eliminating or combining duplicates, articles of speech, or words with only one or two mentions. The most visible words in the word cloud are the ones that appeared most often and give a window into the heart of the Meeting.

What follows are the themes that emerged from Friends responses to each of the questions posed. These themes are intended to get at the sense of those responses. After moving through the themes associated with each question, there is a list of possible strategies that may address some concerns. Nothing here is cast in stone, and whichever strategies are developed, they must be compatible with the notion of who we are and what we are trying to accomplish. Much the same way a clearness committee helps people test leadings and congruence with their values and the needs they aim to address; we as a Meeting must do the same.

## Who We Are

1. **Spiritual Community:** We are a gathering of individuals united by a shared commitment to spiritual exploration and growth. Our foundation is grounded in a collective spiritual practice, and we rely on each other for support and discernment in both personal and communal matters.
2. **Worship-Centered:** Our primary focus is on worship, specifically "waiting worship," which involves a contemplative and attentive approach to seeking divine presence and understanding.

Meeting for Worship forms the core of our community life and serves as a space for spiritual renewal and discernment.

3. **Diverse and Inclusive:** We are a community with a range of ages, financial situations, and backgrounds. Although ethnically and racially less diverse, we desire inclusivity and seek to remain open to various expressions of spirituality and ways of being.
4. **Mystical and Joyful:** We value the experience of divine mystery and presence. We are also characterized by a joyful persistence in our spiritual practice and community life.
5. **Quaker Heritage:** We identify with Quaker principles and values, focusing on the SPICES (Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Stewardship) and aim to be a Quaker presence in San Antonio, exemplifying these values in our actions and interactions.

### **What We're Trying to Accomplish**

1. **Spiritual Growth and Support:** We seek to provide a space for individuals to grow spiritually, reset for the week, and find support for personal and collective challenges. Our community serves as a nurturing environment where people can explore their spirituality and receive encouragement.
2. **Community Impact:** We aim to contribute positively to our local and broader communities, addressing societal issues and facilitating change for the better. Our actions are driven by a desire to live out our beliefs with energy and commitment.
3. **Living Our Values:** Our goal is to embody and share our spiritual values and principles in the world. This includes modeling a different way of living that emphasizes peace, joy, and a commitment to righteousness.
4. **Support and Belonging:** We want to offer a sense of fellowship, fraternity, and belonging, creating a supportive network where Friends feel connected and valued. This support extends to helping each other navigate challenges and celebrate successes.
5. **Exploring New Ways:** We are open to new and perhaps unconventional approaches to spirituality and community life. However, we can be reluctant at times to give up "what is."
6. **Modeling Peace and Joy:** Our intention is to be a model for living peacefully and joyfully, influencing others by our presence and actions within the Meeting and in the wider world.

### **Strengths**

1. **Dedicated Members and Attenders:** The Meeting has committed members who are deeply engaged in each other's lives and in the community.
2. **Quaker Identity and Practice:** A strong grounding in Quaker practice, including a commitment to weekly worship and discernment.

3. **Physical Resources:** A large, beautiful property conducive to peaceful worship, with sufficient funds and financial stability to support the meeting.
4. **Welcoming and Supportive Environment:** A culture of welcoming visitors, a strong sense of community, and a history of collective support and love.
5. **Diverse Life Experiences:** Friends bring varied experiences and skills, enriching the community's spiritual and practical life.
6. **Commitment to Spiritual Growth:** A focus on spiritual depth and the integration of spirit and matter, which helps in nurturing members and engaging with broader societal issues.

### Challenges

1. **Burnout and Over-Reliance on a Few:** A few dedicated Friends, often older, are handling the majority of responsibilities, leading to burnout and a lack of succession planning.
2. **Low Involvement of Newer Members/Attendees:** Difficulty engaging new members in the community's life and helping them integrate Quaker principles into their everyday lives.
3. **Limited Outreach and Visibility:** Challenges in increasing visibility and presence in the larger community.
4. **Aging Population:** An aging demographic within the Meeting, which may impact future participation and leadership.
5. **Operational and Organizational Challenges:** Issues with maintaining active committees, long-term planning, and finding effective ways to teach and integrate new members into Quaker practices.

### Opportunities

1. **Rising Interest in Spirituality:** Increasing interest in non-creedal and spiritually open communities presents an opportunity for growth and engagement.
2. **Support from Quaker Organizations:** Nurturing support from other Quaker groups and networks can provide resources and collaboration opportunities.
3. **Technology and Connectivity:** Utilizing digital tools and online platforms to reach a wider audience and enhance communication within and beyond the Meeting.
4. **Social and Political Context:** Growing polarization and dissatisfaction with traditional religions might draw individuals seeking the inclusive and peace-oriented approach of Quakerism.
5. **Community Needs:** The increasing demand for supportive and inclusive communities can align with FMSA's mission and offer avenues for outreach and service.

## Threats

1. **Economic and Environmental Challenges:** Inflation, rising costs, and climate change impact financial stability and operational costs.
2. **Social Fragmentation:** The impact of social media, reported isolation, and increasing polarization can affect community cohesion and outreach efforts.
3. **Disinterest in Organized Religion:** A general trend away from organized religion and institutional structures may limit new membership and engagement.
4. **Aging Population:** The societal trend of an aging population and the associated challenges may impact long-term sustainability and vitality of the Meeting.
5. **Competing Priorities:** Modern life's demands, such as busy schedules and multiple responsibilities, can limit time and energy for participation in spiritual communities.

## Some Possible Strategies to Consider

- ✓ Provide intentional mentorship to identified Friends in key, difficult-to-fill positions regarding Quaker and Meeting-specific practices.
- ✓ Thank Friends by highlighting their service to meeting.
- ✓ Beyond Quakerism 101, develop study groups that deepen understanding of Quaker principles and practices for newer attenders. *Everything You Wanted to Know about Quakers But Were Afraid to Ask.*
- ✓ Establish buddy systems to provide personalized support and build deeper connections among members and new attenders and help them find their place in the community.
- ✓ Reach out to see what other Meetings are doing to strengthen communal ties and mutual learning.
- ✓ Invite outside groups (one-time, free) into our space in an effort to promote the Meeting.
- ✓ Implement a strategic maintenance plan to preserve the property and explore opportunities for sustainable practices.
- ✓ Consider using invested funds to support the annual budget. Maybe invested funds are used for the property and donated funds are used for other operational expenses.
- ✓ Organize forums where Friends and attenders can share their personal journeys.
- ✓ Look at limited term and scope service projects that do not place stress on Meeting members, but in which they are highly motivated to participate.
- ✓ Have Meeting-wide discussion of leadership transitions and role rotation to distribute responsibilities more evenly.
- ✓ Have more social events.

- ✓ Use broader array of social media to thoughtfully reduce social fragmentation and raise awareness about the Meeting and its activities. Connect to with other organizations that may have constituents that share Quaker values (e.g., Quaker Speaks videos at FGC).
- ✓ Assess and streamline committee structures to ensure they are effective and not overly burdensome. Make difficult decisions to focus on things are truly critical and important to Meeting. No sacred cows.
- ✓ Highlight the Meeting's non-creedal and inclusive approach in outreach efforts to attract those interested in alternative spiritualities, particularly families who may be "refugees" from other traditions.
- ✓ Offer open houses to the wider community that allow newcomers to experience the Meeting's practices and community.
- ✓ Develop targeted outreach strategies and programs to engage younger individuals and families.
- ✓ Create opportunities for different age groups to collaborate and learn from each other.

## Appendix

### Questions & Responses

#### Question 1

**Who are we as Friends Meeting of San Antonio and what are we trying to accomplish?**

- ✓ Spiritual community. Grounding for our work. People we can call upon for support.
- ✓ Place of discernment. Personally, vocationally, corporately.
- ✓ Collection of individuals gathered as a worship community with a focus on intentional organization with members witnessing as individuals in diverse areas.
- ✓ Community that offers fellowship, fraternity, solidarity, and belonging. No magical thinking or easy answers.
- ✓ I believe that gathering for Worship is our primary task as a Meeting. Which means that we have made “waiting worship” available for anyone seeking a gathered community here in San Antonio. And I believe that what we are “waiting for” represents the deepest need of our common humanity, which is to experience this Truth: that loving care and gentleness and tenderness and a hunger and thirst for righteousness (“Peace on Earth and goodwill toward Men”) is in some mysterious way Divinely Sanctioned. And our shared intent is to give voice and active support to “translating” what that even means, given that it is a mystery. And at some level, we already recognize that those of us who “know” this to be True already constitute what Fox called an “invisible church”, a gathered community that recognizes each other as kindred spirits....brothers and sisters, Friends. Quaker Meeting has for hundreds of years served as an established forum for this predestined meeting/Meeting of souls.
- ✓ Integration of spirit and matter and how that creates new possibilities for community – globally and locally.
- ✓ We are a mystical faith community and we are called to be joyfully persistent.
- ✓ As a Meeting, we are a community of people seeking the Light and seeking the opportunity to share the Light with one another and the broader community.
- ✓ We want to live our beliefs in the world – with energy and deep commitment.
- ✓ Our Meeting provides a space for individuals to accomplish many things: reset for the week to come; deal with the challenges we or greater society is facing by exploring ways to better deal with and solve these problems, have the embrace of a community in which the sum feels greater than the parts. As a group: trying to contribute to our community, region, and country.
- ✓ Support each other. Facilitate change for good in our society as a whole. Exemplify our SPICES to the public, however possible.
- ✓ Be a Quaker presence in San Antonio, provide a degree of community, support Quaker witness, a place of worship.
- ✓ Small community over-stretched by the tasks we try to accomplish.
- ✓ Hope to be a place of peace spreading peace in the community, be a model for a different way of living, by our presence lead people toward deep-felt joy.
- ✓ Community trying to live rightly; a supportive community for people seeking spiritual growth.
- ✓ Ultimately, see the phrase in *The Lord's Prayer*, “ they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Allow room for/facilitate individual movement toward that; then promote, encourage, develop that in the meeting community and the wider/whole world. While this is explicitly Christian verbiage, it is meant to be universalist.

- ✓ We are a community – a group of people who have chosen to come together to worship, fellowship, grow, nurture our spirituality, support our work within and outside Meeting, and care for each other.
- ✓ We are older, younger, please range of where we in our lives. Diverse demographically as to age and finances, but not so much ethnically and racially.
- ✓ We are, for the most part, a group of people with similar values.
- ✓ Hope to make the world, our society, and of town better.
- ✓ Become more open to new, and maybe strange, alternative ways of holding us in the spirit.
- ✓ Staying in touch with others' ways of being.

## Question 2

**Strengths: What are the positive attributes of FMSEA in terms of the resources and capacity (grounding in Quaker practice, people, finances, etc.) in the meeting to do what we seek to accomplish?**

- ✓ Physical setting.
- ✓ Dedicated members/attenders who deeply engage with one another.
- ✓ Willingness to share our environment with others.
- ✓ Shared history.
- ✓ I think, to varying degrees, we succeed at doing this every Sunday when we meet for Quaker worship. Any one Friend or attendee may well be experiencing a spiritual strengthening during Meeting and somehow pass that on to another.
- ✓ Sufficient funds (including bequests received).
- ✓ Shared interests, activities, leadings.
- ✓ Commitment to weekly worship.
- ✓ Quaker identity.
- ✓ Large piece of property with unmet potential.
- ✓ Basic group of committed "old-timers."
- ✓ Culture of welcoming visitors and newcomers.
- ✓ Meetinghouse built with purpose.
- ✓ Regular attendance with about 20 people each week.
- ✓ People with time wanting to strengthen the community and care for it.
- ✓ Money.
- ✓ People who have yet to become active in the life of the Meeting and represent untapped wealth and capacity.
- ✓ Many long-time Friends.
- ✓ Space (land, buildings)
- ✓ Stable finances?
- ✓ Love for this community and place.
- ✓ People with a lot of experience.
- ✓ We have people with a great deal of drive, but most of all people with great spiritual depth.
- ✓ Beautiful, nature-filled property conducive to peaceful, quiet worship.
- ✓ Grounding in peace and love.
- ✓ Grounding in Quaker practice of welcoming everyone's thoughts.
- ✓ Financial resources to sustain the property in difficult financial times.
- ✓ Strong group of people with the skills, experience, and willingness to help.
- ✓ Value of being able to express what is said when we say, "that Friend speaks my mind."
- ✓ Diverse life experiences of members and attenders.



- ✓ Strong individuals with high sense of responsibility.
- ✓ Community – We care about each other. We work together.
- ✓ Beautiful, peaceful setting.
- ✓ Money in the bank – even if budgeted revenue doesn't cover budgeted expense in a given year.
- ✓ Friends with gifts they bring to the Meeting – practical skills, lots of knowledge, thoughtfulness.
- ✓ The sitting and the nature that envelops the room and the quiet.
- ✓ Interactions with supportive Friends that contribute to an ambiance of security and friendship.
- ✓ Friends' willingness to share their insights, struggles, etc.
- ✓ Sufficient capital to sustain the Meeting as long as it is stewarded well.
- ✓ Beautiful spot that calls for the spirit.
- ✓ Love.
- ✓ The people.
- ✓ People who show dedication and perseverance in nurturing the Meeting and expressing its values.
- ✓ Collective willingness to question and engage in the process of discernment.
- ✓ Seasoned Friends.
- ✓ Welcoming space.
- ✓ History.
- ✓ Friends committed to the Meeting.
- ✓ Financial resources which means not diverting attention to the immediate crisis of whether there's a roof over our heads.
- ✓ Cadre of individuals giving much to keep the Meeting functioning. (Hope the next question is weaknesses.)

### Question 3

**Weaknesses: What are inhibiting factors within the meeting that stresses our ability to do what we seek to accomplish.**

- ✓ Majority of work falls on a few, largely older, Friends who are getting burned out. No contingency plans if older Friends die or leave the community.
- ✓ Difficulty striking a balance between getting new Friends involved and burning them out.
- ✓ Little to no long-term planning—too few people to run the committees.
- ✓ Many Friends dread and/or avoid business meeting.
- ✓ Can't figure out how to function with or without inactive committees.
- ✓ Lack of presence in the larger community—people don't know we are here.
- ✓ Our acceptance of the values and techniques of the world.
- ✓ We are, perhaps, too rich.
- ✓ Fear of/negative feelings about homeless neighbors.
- ✓ Burned out core leaders.
- ✓ Few Meeting-wide social projects.
- ✓ We must be discerning as to what is the Truth, not only [things] that sound like a good idea.
- ✓ Core few are tired.
- ✓ Fear.
- ✓ Unwillingness to lay things down or let the work go fallow.
- ✓ Uneven Friends (inexperienced).
- ✓ No compelling and tangible "why."
- ✓ Are we bilingual?

- ✓ Same people rotating through inhibits growth and diversity.
- ✓ How are we teaching people about Quakerism once they arrive?
- ✓ Bust lives means we leave quickly after Meeting and don't always know each other.
- ✓ Some committees are dormant.
- ✓ Some committees are held together by one or two people.
- ✓ How are we making sure people know how the meeting works, so they can participate?
- ✓ As I have said in the past, I think we falter as a Meeting when we fail to fully articulate for each other what our "shared intent" is during Meeting for Worship. Constant "circling" around these mysteries, and sharing our insights, is essential.
- ✓ The same 7-8 people, many of whom are getting old, are responsible for sustaining the Meeting's activities and physical plant.
- ✓ Relatively few visitors stay. Recognizing that Quakerism fits a rather small fraction of the population – is that why so few stay or is it something we are or are not doing?
- ✓ Low numbers participating in running the Meeting.
- ✓ Having to maintain a physical property.
- ✓ Aging population in general, and specifically in the Meeting.
- ✓ Not enough opportunities for spiritual nurture.
- ✓ Too few people doing the heavy lifting – and most of those people are in or entering their "golden years." We know we will be losing some of those people in the coming years – through death, moving out of the area, diminished ability to contribute, etc. In general, not many younger people are stepping up. We may need to examine why this is the case. Do they feel welcomed and valued?
- ✓ We have money, but it won't necessarily last forever and we have a responsibility to not leave the Meeting in a bad financial position in the future.
- ✓ Too few Friends willing to work with the children.
- ✓ Our community is aging.
- ✓ Same people willing to volunteer to keep the Meeting functioning.
- ✓ The need for our challenges to be related to a vision of who/what we want to be.
- ✓ Challenges to continue the present state? Youth? Assessing needs?
- ✓ More participation in taking care of the property and activities such as working with the children and yard sale is needed.
- ✓ How do we make sure the service people are doing is feeding them spiritually?
- ✓ The meetinghouse – its welcoming space and extraordinary beauty along with its need for care and maintenance.
- ✓ A system of induction, an initiation, a "baptism," if you will. An education process with a ceremonial beginning and culmination. Those symbols, cultures, and systems are essential in most religious traditions. Will Quakers have something that will informally stand for that?

#### Question 4

**Opportunities: What are the favorable factors (societal, economic, etc.) outside of the meeting that influence our ability to do what we seek to accomplish.**

- ✓ Nurturing support from other Quaker groups like SCYM, Friends Peace Teams, and FCNL for some Friends in Meeting.
- ✓ Increasing social and political polarization in the U.S. and the world signals the need for communities that bring people together. Quaker process of group discernment meets this need; so we set a good example. We are a solution that has found a new problem.

- ✓ The spiritual quest for a meaningful life and how one's direct life experience is a reflection of spirit.
- ✓ Our doors are open every Sunday, all invited. I believe that there is a growing core of "seekers" who are put off by the tendency of most spiritual communities to emphasize creedal beliefs ("feeding on words") rather than recognizing that the divine spirit leads us to live in a distinctly devoted fashion. This is something Quakers have always recognized, and it helps seekers to experience the fact that we have always known this.
- ✓ Uncertainty continues to change and confronts us daily with little time to integrate new and changing information.
- ✓ Easy to find common enemies.
- ✓ Younger people are hungry for authentic novelty.
- ✓ The Internet as an idea spreader.
- ✓ Quaker school graduates are moving further afield.
- ✓ Parker Palmer (much as I dislike him).
- ✓ Many are becoming fed up with constant war around the world.
- ✓ People leaving strict religious environments often seek a more open spiritual community.
- ✓ Many are lonely and seeking fellowship and support.
- ✓ Older generation still have pensions and IRAs which allow the financial support of Meeting.
- ✓ Older generation can and does support the Meeting with gifts of time because they are not working.
- ✓ Ability to network and share online presence by Zoom, emails, newsletters, website, social media.
- ✓ After Covid people crave reconnecting and value community.
- ✓ Difficult political/social conditions (big conflicts between liberals and conservatives) led to people seeking out Meeting to find community.
- ✓ Political unrest tends to bring people into spiritual spaces.
- ✓ The rise of spirituality.
- ✓ Worldwide, millions of people are turning to meditation as a way of engaging in a spiritual community – moving away from organized religion in general.
- ✓ Disappointment in more dogmatic religions make Quaker philosophy more appealing.
- ✓ Young families with children looking for a spiritual home. Spirit-led non-religious families might find Meeting helpful.

## Question 5

**Threats: What are the negative factors outside of the meeting that influence our ability to do what we seek to accomplish.**

- ✓ Climate change partially contributes to increasing insurance premiums, inflation, social disruption – internal and international migration.
- ✓ Social fragmentation caused by (anti) social media; sizable groups in U.S. and elsewhere feeling repressed, ignored, and denigrated by groups that are or perceived to be elite; too many choices (e.g., 500+ cable channels, streaming, etc).
- ✓ No more middle class.
- ✓ People working multiple jobs.
- ✓ Inflation is making everything more expensive.
- ✓ Dependence on technology (good and bad).
- ✓ Most people think they need a creed to have spiritual structure in their life, and this is in fact true for many people. Many people are reassured to know that they are thinking and believing and performing in tandem with a set community, and take comfort in reciting together, be it the Nicene

Creed or the Hail Mary or a Buddhist chant. Quakers are by and large unable to give that level of reassurance.

- ✓ Increase in homelessness.
- ✓ Disconnected/disjointed homelessness responses.
- ✓ Overextended under 40-somethings.
- ✓ Parents/families are being pressured from too many sides.
- ✓ Military town.
- ✓ Boomers gave their kids intense religious/spiritual trauma and continue to stand by these choices.
- ✓ Climate change both existentially and in rising costs (e.g., insurance).
- ✓ Disinterest in “organized religion.”
- ✓ Lack of patience – time for worship.
- ✓ Economic stresses.
- ✓ Common belief in Texas that Quakers died out centuries ago.
- ✓ Short attention spans.
- ✓ Aging population, lower birth rates.
- ✓ Pace of modern life for working families and individuals. People find it hard to set aside half a day for Meeting.
- ✓ Demands on people to take care of their children and parents.
- ✓ General trend in society toward fewer people volunteering (especially in leadership positions or longer-term commitments).
- ✓ Things are getting disproportionately more expensive – insurance, things related to the upkeep of the property, utilities, etc.
- ✓ Feelings of divisiveness and intolerance in the wider culture seeps into our community sometimes.
- ✓ Children with their own social lives pull parents away.
- ✓ People don’t want to give up time for something that might not have an immediate impact. Fast-paced society/instantaneous satisfaction culture.
- ✓ Families start later in life.
- ✓ Financial insecurity of younger people.
- ✓ Many distractions that eat up time on the Internet. These are easy to turn to when people are faced with economic problems and busy family life leaving less time to get involved in a spiritual community.
- ✓ Climate change
- ✓ Big money controls much of the media and its money controls political agency.
- ✓ Shorter attention spans.
- ✓ Too much busyness and work activities – less energy.
- ✓ Lower value of personal interaction.
- ✓ Very mobile population.
- ✓ Too much of everything.
- ✓ Maybe worship on Saturday; so Sunday could be free time?
- ✓ Despair – post Covid.
- ✓ Current condition of the U.S. economy, etc.
- ✓ U.S. culture of individual vs group.
- ✓ Geographical – we are spread out.
- ✓ Small communities do not do well without outreach.
- ✓ Texas.
- ✓ People are having to prioritize, and many are pulling back.