

Considerations For Struggling, Small Meetings

Membership in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has been declining for some time, members are attending worship less often, and the availability of car transport makes a lower density of meeting houses less inconvenient. These factors all affect the meetings of Concord Quarterly Meeting. The current practice of the Yearly Meeting is that decisions about laying down or combining meetings are made by the individual meetings themselves. And my “Considerations...” here are not calling for a change in this practice. Nevertheless, there are reasons of spiritual health and good stewardship why some Concord meetings may wish to consider consolidation of meetings for worship and the repurposing of their existing properties and resources.

Geography and travel distances sometimes make small meetings inevitable. But those are not the primary reasons for nearly empty meeting houses in the Philadelphia area. We therefore should consider that when a person (even one with some Quaker background) walks into a meeting for worship with fewer than a half dozen present they are unlikely to return. Hopefully they will look around for a larger one. They *may* not look very hard, however. And if they have children and the meeting makes only ad hoc provision for them, they may well conclude that Quakerism is dying and not look further. The point is that a very small meeting is not only an extra burden for existing regular attenders but is also creating disappointment for new attenders and discouraging them from visiting other meetings in the area. There are real benefits in a meeting that has at least 20 to 40 regular attenders – in the quality of worship, in ministry, in capacity to mount an attractive program for youth, and in ability to meet the organizational needs of running a Quaker meeting, not to speak of creating an adequate financial base to maintain the meeting house and provide a cadre of members to use it effectively. Quakers often deeply love the meeting houses in which they grew up, but a meeting house, by itself, doesn't make a meeting that a diversity of members wants to attend regularly. If there is another meeting nearby that everyone could reach with no more than a half hour drive, consolidation could well offer very substantial benefits in worship, fellowship, youth program, management, and quite possibly growth. Is maintaining a very small meeting in an area such as Concord Quarter doing a disservice to Quakerism?

Beyond the spiritual challenges of very small meetings there also are issues of stewardship of the resources our Quaker predecessors have left in our care. Meeting houses with few regular attenders frequently are poorly maintained, so that their value is depreciated by each passing year of neglect (whether due to lack of finances or of the people to manage their use effectively. There have been blithe expressions in Yearly Meeting sessions about reparations being owed to native Americans and to African-Americans for the land and labor they involuntarily contributed to the wealth of Quakers in this area. Are we using the resources of Quaker institutions in a way that meets these historical obligations? Most of the existing membership of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting have no Quaker ancestors and many of us have families that came to the US after the worst of these offenses ended. As members of the Yearly Meeting, however, we *have* inherited a fiduciary responsibility for the right use of the resources that were bequeathed to our care. There is very modest *liquid* wealth in our Quaker institutions. But we *do* own very considerable physical property, which has substantial value. Are we *using* that property in a way that optimally reflects the priorities implied by our Quaker values? Some of our properties might be

sold or repurposed in ways that benefited the historically-disadvantaged or otherwise better represented our testimonies.

When I have casually expressed these considerations before, some Friends have objected that we need to preserve ownership of our existing meeting houses so they are there for a hoped-for resurgence in Quaker membership. But the enthusiasm and energy that would come from the right use of our Quaker resources will do more to create a new Quaker resurgence than neglected meeting houses can do. Berkeley, California (where we lived for 30 years) has three Quaker meetings but only two meeting houses. The largest and most energetic of those three congregations is the one that rents space in a public adult school and refuses to build a meeting house.

What might Friends do if their meeting is struggling because of its size? I do *not* suggest that they simply close down. A first step might be to find a deserving partner for the use of the meeting house in order to share in its maintenance and management. I did help Concord Monthly Meeting with such a quest, but it was not immediately successful. It may take a concerted effort to find such a partner and nurture a relationship. Initially such a partnership would be an extra burden on an already over-stretched active membership, but success probably will bring new energy and (human) resources to the meeting.

A second step would be to see if there is another struggling meeting nearby with which a close relationship might be fostered – perhaps initially alternating meetings for worship or other programs between the existing meeting places. If the relationship prospers it may eventually lead to consolidation.

Third, consider what physical properties are strictly necessary to the current and likely future needs of the meeting. Most of our meeting properties sit on valuable land, even if the existing building on it has deteriorated. Surplus property could be rented or sold to better meet worship and charitable needs, at the extreme even just an adequate endowment to maintain the graveyard. Eventually, however, active stewardship of the property as a resource may lead to selling it to better finance a consolidated meeting or sustain a charitable initiative. Multiple meetings in the Quarter might even wish to liberate their underused properties to finance a still wider and more ambitious expression of Quaker values.

My point then is not that we should simply give up and shut down some meetings; instead we should be engaged in active, creative discussions throughout the Quarter to steward our resources in such a way as to make all our meetings vibrant, continued benefits to our communities, rather than underused historical artifacts.

David Leonard
Birmingham Monthly Meeting
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