

Helping a Small Meeting Prepare for Outreach Work

Good morning When Beth* contacted me about presenting something of Belfast's outreach work and experience, she asked if there was "one piece of work rising" that I might share. Beth knew how Belfast has really grown in Spirit and numbers this past couple of years and much about the success of our focused in-reach and out-reach efforts. But, when considering her request, it immediately occurred to me that we could not have undergone such change, experienced such a transformation, if not for the time spent doing key preparatory work: Discernment. For without that, we were not open to using the tools and resources that were available to us.

So, a little background: I began to attend Belfast Area Friends Meeting in Belfast, Maine, in 2009. I knew – from the very first time I attended Meeting for Worship and was welcomed by one Friend, the only one present that particular First Day – that I'd found a spiritual home.

Small, rural meetings offer many wonderful opportunities for worship and community. And, indeed, that that was very much the case during Belfast's early years. Like-hearted Friends first gathered in 1977: Ten years later, Belfast Area Friends became a Monthly Meeting. During the '80s and '90s, the Meeting was vibrant and active, welcoming 15-20 Friends, at times more, as well as their children to worship and First Day School. There was a deep sense of community and a strong connection to the Quarter and Yearly Meeting. But, like most meetings, small or large, Belfast had its challenges and commenced a long fallow period, a "quietist" time of many years.

While I cannot comment on what contributed to the decline Belfast experienced, nor what other Friends might have observed, I can offer my impressions of Belfast Area Friends in 2009. Typically, three to five Friends gathered each First Day. Meeting for Worship was held in a rented space in a rural, private school, quite off the beaten track and 8 miles from Belfast. Making meeting even more difficult to find, there were no up-to-date e- or print listings in local or Quaker publications. While there was a kitchenette available, no effort was made to have coffee or fellowship time together after meeting. There was no longer a First Day School. In the rare instance Seekers found us, they tended not to return. In addition, within

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months of my finding Belfast Area Friends, the private school that had served as the Meeting's home for close to 15 years announced it was closing. In the subsequent 3 1/2 years, the Meeting moved 5 times before finding its way to its current space. Belfast Area Friends were challenged, in many ways.

During this time, not surprisingly, the question of outreach came up. Again and again, we asked ourselves – “How can people find us? If they do find us, what might make them want to return? What sustains us as we work to meet the many challenges that confront our Meeting?” Here, again, we found ourselves challenged, stumbling as we raised questions about outreach. Indeed, I would say, we hit a wall.

While various outreach ideas were acknowledged as good for *other* meetings, the need to incorporate something new or different in *our* meeting was deemed quite unnecessary, or – if ideas were deemed worthy of consideration – they weren't followed-up on. Whether offered by Yearly Meeting or, perhaps, by a Friend who had visited or attended other meetings, new ideas and tools didn't seem to spark any real interest. Discomfort with outreach efforts was framed in a number of ways: “We've always done it this way” or “We're fine as we are” or “We don't need to be fixed” come to mind. Perhaps these responses reflected fear of change or a very contemplative, inwardly-focused leaning.

Whatever their source, feelings such as these strengthen the insularity that small meetings risk over time. These responses also communicate to newcomers that their ideas and experiences aren't welcomed. The result? Visitors did not come back, attenders left, members left, and the remaining Friends scratched their heads as to why we struggled so, initially quite unaware of how we may have *closed*, rather than *opened*, the door to new opportunities for growth.

So, what's a Meeting to do when it's stuck in the same old, not fruitful, routine? How do we open ourselves to something new? How do we *see* with new eyes and *hear* with new ears to the needs of our small meetings and the Friends that make up those meetings?

I would suggest that we can start by posing questions that might sound like prompts to taking action, to “doing,” but are really guides to discerning who we are, to “being” -- Being present, Being available, Being open to one

another and the answers that lie within. Because without listening to that which is within, we are simply not able to take up the tools available to us and use them effectively.

What questions might help us open ourselves and our hearts to one another and those answers that lie within? Using a simple “Who, What, When, Where, How” format, these are some of the questions that Belfast Area Friends have considered and continue to hold....

...Who does what? When there are so few, there’s often a leaning toward a committee-of-the-whole approach. This sometimes results in no one taking responsibility for basics, like getting to meeting early to open and set up chairs, or getting up to greet a new face at the door.

...What are we afraid of? What will change mean to our worship and handling of business? What do we do if children actually come? What will more people, different personalities, “do” to our meeting? What challenging issue has my meeting been avoiding?

... When is the right time to begin (looking for a new space, advertising our whereabouts, offering mid-week worship, establishing some form of adult religious education, reestablishing a named Ministry and Counsel)? Is the slow process of getting something off the ground God’s time or us getting in our own way? Are we using our time together to discern, or are we simply reinforcing reasons to delay changing well-established patterns and habits?

... Where do we (meet for worship, enjoy fellowship, have our small library)? In a rented space with no foyer/area outside of the designated worship space, where do we greet people? Where do we post signage? Where do we have fellowship if we don’t have a kitchen?

... How do we share space? If we don’t feel it’s “ours,” when we are renters or share the space with other groups, what impact does this have on our inviting others in?

... How do we introduce Seekers to who we are? To how we live our faith? To how we go out into the world? To the people in our meeting and what they are led to work on, individually and as a meeting? To how we conduct business?

There are obviously many more questions that might be raised to help open us to who we are, as a Meeting, and what we would like to be. For Belfast, considering these questions hasn't been easy. It's taken time. It's been done informally, over coffee and at Friends' homes. It's been done planfully, at Business Meetings, at rise of Meeting using a worship sharing format, and -- most successfully -- at a day-long retreat where we tried to envision where we were, what we offered one another, how we are Faithful, and what we need to grow more fully in Love.

And, there, I would suggest, is the heart of successful outreach: *Being Faithful*. We didn't find talking about outreach, or what we needed to do, a fruitful way of first approaching the many challenges that confronted us. What we did find fruitful, was exploring how to be Faithful, how to be Loving. And, from there, we were able to see what it was that we wanted to share with one another and those whom we hoped might one day join us. Opening ourselves to the "still small voice" within opened us to using the resources available to us, finding the energy to follow-through, and – so far – supporting the new ways we welcome and sustain one another. We simply had to pause, set aside time for the sometimes slow, but always fruitful process of discernment, and then – not surprisingly – we began to see our way clear to an outreach path illuminated and supported by the Light.

Leslie Umans
Belfast Area Friends Meeting
Belfast, Maine
April 4, 2015

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What questions will help your Meeting prepare for outreach work?

7. How are Quakers involved in social issues?

Friends' belief in the inherent divinity within each person has led to a history of working for peace, justice, and equality. The Waldo County Peace Activist Award is under the care of Belfast Area Friends Meeting, providing financial support to graduating high school seniors engaged in planting seeds of peace. Friends in our Meeting are active with Native American, end-of-life, economic, environmental, and political concerns. We support peacemaking and education among Friends in East Africa and other parts of the world. Ask, and we'll be happy to share how we "go out" into the world.

8. Where can I learn more about Quakerism and this community?

To receive our monthly calendar and news about upcoming events, ask to have your e-mail added to our ListServe. Our library has pamphlets and books available to borrow, including "Faith and Practice," a book published by New England Quakers that represents our beliefs, traditions, organizational structure, and history. In our Quaker Studies Group, readings are discussed each month. To experience the Quaker decision-making process, you may attend the monthly Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business ("Business Meeting" for short). And, of course, join us for Meeting for Worship.

Prepared by
Ministry and Counsel
Belfast Area Friends Meeting
March 2015

Welcome to Meeting for Worship

with
Belfast Area Friends Meeting
of the
Religious Society of Friends
(Quakers)

Every Sunday
11 a.m.

95 High Street, Belfast, Maine
Take the path through the Peace Garden
to the Friends' worship space,
The Lounge at the First Baptist Church

1. What happens in Meeting for Worship?

We sit together in silence and begin to draw our minds and hearts away from daily preoccupations to better hear the “still, small voice” of God. Some days, the Meeting will remain entirely silent, but usually the Spirit will move someone to speak. Friends are encouraged to accept each message in the spirit in which it is given. If it does not speak to you, consider that it may speak to others. After an hour, a designated person will signal the end of Meeting by joining hands with those seated nearby.

2. How do Friends worship?

This will certainly vary with the individual, but most Friends describe a process of “centering down,” a time when we settle our minds, moving from busyness to openness. In the process, we may give thanks for our blessings and ask for help with our troubles. We may do the same for those around us, or for others in our hearts. Sometimes we find our way blocked: Silence can reveal barriers that alienate us from God and truth. In silence, we may also find a way to heal that rift.

3. Who is responsible for ministry?

In the absence of professional clergy, we are all potential ministers. Some of the most powerful ministry is silent, but it also may take the form of words. One should not speak in Meeting without a strong sense of urgency and the conviction that the message will serve others. If you have a message for the Meeting that comes from the Divine Spirit, please share it by standing, if you are able, and speaking so all can hear. It is important to leave enough silence between messages for Friends to reflect on each one. Brevity is a good thing. Sincerity and faithfulness to the “still, small voice” are paramount.

4. What happens after Meeting?

After we have joined hands with those around us, we continue in a worshipful manner while inviting Friends to share “afterthoughts,” those reflections that did not quite rise as a message from the Divine. We then introduce ourselves, announcements are made, and we adjourn for fellowship and refreshments. Some committees may meet. There might be a discussion group or presentation planned.

5. What do Quakers believe?

We believe that everyone has within them “that of God” or something of the Divine Spirit. Quakers began as Christians who rebelled against the Church of England in the 17th century. Today, not all Friends consider themselves Christians. Many Friends experience the Spirit as the inner light, the seed of truth, or the wonder of the earth, and may not believe in God. Quakers do not ask members to agree on a creed because essential truth cannot be fixed once and for all with a few words. Rather, we continue to seek it afresh as it applies to our lives. Belfast Area Friends Meeting includes people with a range of beliefs from non-theist to Christ-centered. We are united in our experience of the spiritual benefit of our practice. We welcome Seekers from all religious backgrounds.

6. Can I bring my children?

Yes! During Meeting for Worship, there is childcare available for preschoolers. First Day School (Sunday School) materials are available for school-aged children. Children and teens are always welcome to sit with the adults in silence, though it may take some familiarity with Quaker practice before they are comfortable with remaining still and available to the movement of the Divine Spirit.