



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
OF FRIENDS
QUAKERS

What We Learned: Takeaways for Local Ministry and Counsel Committees

Experiment with time. When surveyed, young adults, teens, and parents of young children all told us that if schedules were different—in other words, if worship or other meeting activities happened at times other than Sunday mornings—they might be more able to attend. Can your meeting try gathering at different times and on different days, even just every now and then? Can you take the lead from young adults and families about which times or days might work best? (For example: some meetings have tried holding meeting for business either before or after worship on alternating months. Others have held social events or parent meet-ups on weeknights or Saturdays.)

Bring all ages together for worship. Many meetings involved in the partner project tried occasional multigenerational worship, with children present for the entire hour. Providing quiet materials, like crayons and paper, coloring mandalas, picture books, pipe cleaners, or Wikki Stix, can create an outlet for energy while leaving space for contemplation and listening inwardly. Most of the meetings also asked someone to tell a story, such as a Bible story or a Quaker history story¹, at the beginning of the hour. All of the meetings that tried community worship decided to continue it, in most cases about once a month. It's important to prepare everyone well for this experience. Ask younger Friends: what do you need to be supported in this? Ask older Friends: what do *you* need to be supported in all-ages worship?

Provide opportunities for Friends to talk about how they live their faith. When we surveyed 265 Quakers of all ages, we discovered that Friends reported *thinking* a lot about their faith and how it guides their lives—but most say that they *talk* about these things only rarely. They also reported that they really valued the opportunities that they did have for these discussions. What can you do in your local community to encourage these conversations both formally and informally, including intergenerationally? It might be something as simple as asking a Friend at social hour, “How was worship for you today?”

Feed people! Meetings that make time for social activities, especially social activities involving food, have found that members and attenders who had been “around the periphery” of the group are now present more frequently and more fully. These events include spiritual conversations over coffee, lunches or dinners for young adults, and family movie nights. It helps if the food is not potluck; bringing a contribution can be a serious logistical (or financial) challenge for some.

Be brave. Lift up the rug. What's been swept under the rug over the years? Whatever it is, it didn't go away. Newcomers and youth will soon pick up on conflicts and wounds within the community, so it's better to address them straight-on rather than act as if they are not there. When we begin to look at our condition as a community, our skills in welcome and inclusion,

¹www.faithandplaystories.org

historical concerns or even hurts can come to the surface. Healing comes *before* moving forward meaningfully. This can be very, very hard. Remember: you're not alone. Reach out to your regional/quarterly or yearly meeting. Ask for help. A skillful Friend from outside your meeting's community can often provide the necessary support for truth-telling and forgiveness.

Invite relative newcomers into leadership. It's important not to overwhelm someone by asking them to do what they're not ready for, especially alone. But we've seen powerful things happen when relative newcomers to the meeting were invited to plan programming or step into significant service, *especially if that invitation is a reflection of genuine gifts that the individual brings*. Those who are new to our communities see things that the rest of us find difficult to see, simply because we've become accustomed to the status quo over time. And newcomers feel affirmed and fully included when they have the freedom to effect meaningful change, as long as they're well supported and genuinely valued by long-time Friends. Create opportunities for Friends to grow in their leadership and learn from experience by providing constructive feedback.

Listen extra carefully to Friends who are 35 years old and younger, who have been Quakers for less than ten years, who are gender nonconforming, who are people of color, who are parents of children and teens, or who are single or divorced. In our surveys and focus groups, these populations very often reported experiences, needs, opinions, or concerns that differed from the majority of Friends' responses. It's likely that we miss valuable perspectives when we don't remember to pay particular attention to these groups.

Find ways to talk and teach about the experience of unprogrammed worship. New Quakers self-report learning a lot about how meetings for business and committees work in their first three years as Friends, but they don't self-report learning how to participate in meetings for worship. While the actual experience of worship is central, opportunities to explore worship in *other* ways—discussion, reading, facilitated activities—are important.

Prioritize support of parents with children under the age of ten. Compared with other adults, parents of young children attend less frequently, are challenged to find ways to participate in the business of meeting, rarely connect with their meetings about what matters to them, and don't know other Friends in their meeting on a deep level. Meetings can help by arranging opportunities specifically for parents and by making sure that parents themselves are not responsible for facilitating childcare or other children's programming.

Celebrate small successes. Building vibrant, multigenerational faith communities is hard work and takes a lot of time and patience. It'll be easier to stick with it if you celebrate the little steps along the way, affirming each other's dedication and openness to experiment.