

# The Life Cycle of Meetings

Guest-edited by Emily Provance



From the September 2022 issue of *SPARK*, the New York Yearly Meeting newsletter: [nym.org/spark](http://nym.org/spark)

## Introduction

Emily Provance

15th Street Meeting

When I travel in ministry, I hear stories. I also hear the kinds of worries that Friends are hesitant to bring up under ordinary circumstances. Here's one that Friends often whisper to me privately: "I'm not sure that our meeting will survive."

It's funny that Friends say that quietly. There's often no hesitation to proclaim that "Quakers are dying," but the end of a particular local meeting seems harder to face.

In August 2021, I gathered a group of Friends on Zoom who had all expressed interest in the concern of faithfully laying down meetings. We're a motley group, from four different countries and at least a dozen different Quaker institutions. Some of us are staff members; others are clerks or former clerks. Still others bring particular expertise to the conversation, such as a history with hospice care. We've worshiped, exchanged

information, studied recent meeting closures, and interviewed ecumenical experts, and in doing so, we've learned that local faith communities have a life cycle. They are born, they grow, they go through a variety of struggles and exciting moments, and eventually, they decline and die. The average life of a local faith community is only about a hundred years.

I find this comforting. Of course the meeting will not survive. Ultimately, none of them do. This is normal.

And of course, it's not true that Quakerism is dying. Quakerism is transforming and being birthed anew. Yes, many local meetings are dying; census analysis shows that 24% fewer Quaker meetings and churches existed in the United States in 2020 than did in 2010. But God's way is the way of resurrection. When the old goes to rest, it makes space for something different to rise.

In this issue, you'll read about the whole life cycle of meetings. You'll read reflections, queries, personal stories, and historical accounts. You'll



Photo by Kathy Slattery

read about new meetings, about meetings that grew so fast that they had to make unexpected adjustments, about meetings undergoing significant transitions, and about meetings that are laying themselves down or have been laid down. You'll read reflections from Friends in North America, Europe, Central America, and Africa, because the life cycle of a meeting is a universal truth. (For this same reason, I anticipate this issue of *Spark* being shared online outside the circles of New York Yearly Meeting.)

To me, the ultimate question is this: how is our meeting faithful to God's call for us now?



## Stamford-Greenwich Friends Meeting: The End of a Good Life

Esmé Ingledew

Chappaqua Meeting

& Janet Hough

Cobscook Meeting, NEYM

Stamford Greenwich Friends Meeting began as a worship group in the garden of John LeRoy DeForest in

1948. It became a preparative meeting under Purchase Meeting in 1949, and a monthly meeting within Purchase Quarterly Meeting in 1953. A building for a meetinghouse was purchased in 1951, with the help of a loan from the School Fund of the Purchase Executive Meeting. The meeting quickly grew to more than 100 members, and a large meeting room was added in 1956-1957, with the help of a loan from New York Yearly Meeting (NYYM).

From 1952 until 1968, the meeting

hosted summer high school conferences in cooperation with AFSC. During the Korean and Vietnam wars the meeting operated a draft counseling center serving the Greenwich and Stamford communities. Bert and Sylvia Bigelow were early members of the meeting. In 1955, the Bigelows and other Friends in the NYC area housed two of the 25 Hiroshima Maidens, young women who had been badly disfigured by the atom bomb explo-

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sions who were brought to New York for medical treatment. Bert was also the captain of the Golden Rule, which he attempted to sail into a nuclear testing area in the Pacific in 1958.

During the late 90's the meeting began to lose members as many retired and moved away. The First Day school gradually disappeared and no new people joined the meeting. In 2003, the clerk of the meeting, Bill Dick, wrote to NYYM to report the dwindling numbers and the difficulty of sustaining the meeting with only eight or nine people living nearby and attending meeting. In 2004, the meeting acted on some of the ideas they got from other small meetings and from a workshop on Advancement. Carol Holmes, one of the traveling Friends of NYYM, began visiting for worship regularly, as did some Friends from neighboring meetings. But the core of active local members continued to decline in numbers and in health. After a business meeting in October 2005, the clerk informed the yearly meeting that they were ready to lay the meeting down.

Over the next five years, the last members of Stamford-Greenwich meeting worked carefully through the process of deciding how, whether and when to sell the property and lay down the meeting. Support from Friends in the quarter was mixed. Regrettably, no one gave regular help with finances or property maintenance. However, members of Purchase Quarter Ministry & Counsel (PQ M&C) were able to offer some spiritual support and pastoral care. PQ M&C helped Stamford-Greenwich Friends hold meeting for worship on Sunday afternoons once a month, to enable Friends from other meetings in the quarter to participate while still remaining active in their home meetings. The numbers were small, generally 2-3 visitors with

3-4 from Stamford-Greenwich, yet the worship was consistently sweet, deep and nurturing.

Esmé Ingledew, Bill Dick's wife and the meeting's treasurer and recorder, carried the responsibility for maintenance and upkeep of the building in the final years. In the fall of 2007, with Bill's health in serious decline, Esmé wrote to all the members to explain the dire condition of the meeting, and began to gather the documents necessary to sell the property. In February 2008, at Purchase Quarterly Meeting, Stamford-Greenwich Meeting was declared inactive. A care committee was formed by Purchase Quarterly Meeting to support the ongoing process of discernment about the future of the meeting. On the committee were Deb Wood and Peter Close, members of Purchase Meeting; Janet Hough, Chappaqua Meeting; and Carol Holmes, Brooklyn Meeting.

In September 2009, a memorial service for Bill Dick was held in the Stamford-Greenwich Meetinghouse, under the care of the Purchase Quarter Ministry & Counsel. With the glorious voices of Serendipity Chorale, this beautiful memorial service for Bill, the meeting's final clerk, was also the final meeting for worship to take place in the meetinghouse.

For years, Esmé and the care committee felt the property to be a heavy burden. Stamford-Greenwich and Purchase Quarter Friends believed that the meeting should sell the property before the meeting was laid down. It came as a relief when it was suggested that it would not be necessary—that, in fact, it might not be in good order for a meeting of one active member to make a decision to sell a meetinghouse.

In the fall of 2010, the care committee sent a letter to all remaining members of Stamford-Green-

wich Meeting asking where their membership should be transferred prior to laying down the meeting. The transfers were accomplished and reported to the NYYM office. The meeting was finally laid down by the quarter at their meeting on November 7, 2010. This action was reported to NYYM at Fall Sessions 2010. Upon the meeting's being laid down, ownership of the meeting's property and its assets transferred to New York Yearly Meeting. The care and maintenance of the property, payment of all bills, and decisions about its future use and/or sale became the responsibility of the NYYM Trustees.



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## Facing Hard Truths

**Robin Mohr**

Executive Secretary,  
Friends World Committee  
for Consultation,  
Section of the Americas

When Dorothy Grannell became clerk of Falmouth Quarterly Meeting in 2013, she realized that she hadn't received the standard annual report from a few of its monthly meetings. Checking the files, she discovered one of them hadn't reported in several years. Being a curious person as well as a diligent clerk, she decided to follow up and ask why not. The planning group of the quarter had already been concerned enough about the lack of participation that they had developed a visitation procedure. What she found was that this monthly meeting had not met regularly in several years. Upon further investigation, she learned there were only two remaining members still alive, neither of whom lived in the area anymore. The last clerk of the meeting had become a member of another local

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church. He was able to show that he had cared for the remaining finances, library, and records responsibly; he just didn't notify anyone about the process. The final remaining member was encouraged to transfer his membership, either to a meeting closer to where he now lived or to another monthly meeting in the quarter. Then, over several months, the quarterly meeting officially laid down the monthly meeting, which had ceased to exist for all practical purposes long before this formal process.

When Dorothy accepted the clerkship of the quarterly meeting, it certainly wasn't clear that this was part of her responsibilities. However, she didn't just shrug and pass the list of nonresponsive meetings on to the next clerk. Instead she named and addressed the challenges of the situation:

"Our reluctance to face conflict and unmask truth to help a healing process is a major barrier to the health of our meetings. If quarters were more active, we might not be losing meetings. Falmouth Quarter has lost two of our six meetings in five years. We were either afraid to confront a conflict situation or were not doing pastoral care of meetings we were not seeing or hearing from. Vigilance, paying attention, and truth-telling are all part of the testimonies of community and integrity."

Have you heard of situations like this before? I hear these stories all over the country, across all the branches of Friends, and God has laid it on my heart to share them, not as a professional but as a Friend: I believe that an extraordinary number of Quaker meetings and churches are not going to survive the next decade. I don't have exact statistics, but I don't think this is really news. The real question

I have is how will we (meaning the whole Religious Society of Friends) care for the monthly meetings that will not be continuing?

I started sharing this concern with other Quaker leaders a couple of years ago. For every story I hear about how a meeting that had dwindled to oblivion was revived by just one person moving there, I hear three others about an abandoned burial ground that has to be reclaimed and then sold to the local municipality, or the financial loss of money invested in a meetinghouse where nobody meets, or a fight over a meetinghouse property between siblings or cousins that is never reconciled....

We can learn to do this gracefully. The life cycle does not just affect individuals. Institutions of all sizes also come into existence, serve a purpose, and sometimes come to the end of their faithful service. Over the last 50 years, the hospice movement has been a healthy counterbalance to our society's long-standing aversion to talk about death as well as to the increased medicalization of the end of life. We can learn to talk openly about the end of life with dignity, love, and respect for the life that has been. The hospice movement pays deep attention to people living their best lives in what time remains. But it also assists with resolving legal and financial issues before the end arrives and with providing pastoral care for the caregivers....

This is going to be hard work. Beginning a conversation about the end of life is always difficult, whether for an individual or an institution. Perhaps more miracles will happen as we take responsibility for the facts of life. Facing how many monthly meetings will not survive the next decade is a daunting task, but knowing you are not alone in facing

the existential questions is one of the reasons for the existence of religious communities. Doing even some of this work now will release more energy for the growth and faithfulness of Friends in the rest of this century, but only if we start talking about it now.

*This is an excerpt from an article originally published in Friends Journal in April 2020. You can read the remainder of the article at [friendsjournal.org/facing-hard-truths/](https://friendsjournal.org/facing-hard-truths/) Robin Mohr can be contacted at [robinm@fwccamericas.org](mailto:robinm@fwccamericas.org).*



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## Selling Poughkeepsie Meetinghouse

Don Badgley  
Poughkeepsie Meeting

Poughkeepsie Friends Meeting built its new meetinghouse/church in 1926 because it had outgrown its prior meeting house. It was very much a community church and gathering place and had several hundred members. Poughkeepsie Meeting was Orthodox and Pastoral, with both a large church building and also an adjacent Victorian parsonage where the minister's family lived. In the 1970s this began to change. Friends aged and moved and died and membership gradually declined. Membership then stabilized through the addition of new members. When the last pastor was released for health reasons, he was not replaced. The meeting adopted both programmed and unprogrammed worship; by the end of the 70s, it abandoned programmed worship altogether.

The large meeting space, with pews and facing bench and lectern was abandoned except for larger gatherings and Friends began weekly

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# Queries for Meetings in Transition

Anne Pomeroy  
New Paltz Meeting

## Taking Stock of the Life of the Meeting

1. What has been the spiritual journey of the meeting? How has the meeting grown or transformed in its journey? How would you describe the spiritual vitality of the meeting now?
2. What spiritual gifts has the meeting carried? Have any been laid down?
3. Who is in the meeting community now? Who are we now?
4. What would you tell a beloved Friend about the meeting? What would you share of its history?
5. What do you hold dear about the meeting? How can you acknowledge this gift and the way you will carry it forward?
6. What is important for the meeting to let go of? Are there aspects of the meeting's shadow that can be addressed before the meeting is laid down? What healing can occur through the transition of the meeting?

## Care of Members

1. How will the members and attenders of the meeting be accompanied in their grieving and letting go? (by individuals beyond the meeting community)
2. What does saying goodbye to the meeting mean for individuals and for the meeting as a whole?
3. What issues arise around grief and grieving for individuals in the community? For example,

does it bring up unresolved grief?

4. What aspects of the meeting are you individually grateful for?
5. What rises for people around the ending of a spiritual community?
6. What impact does laying down the meeting have on an individual's identity? On their identity as a Quaker?
7. Where will the members/attenders turn next on their spiritual journey?

## Care of the Collective

1. What supports are available in the wider Quaker community to accompany the meeting in the transition?
2. Are there gifts of the community that could be looked at as legacy – to pass on – to send forth? What might this look like?
3. Will laying down the meeting impact the broader Quaker community? How might this be tended?
4. What relationships in the larger Quaker community will be impacted? How will the larger community accompany the Meeting in this transition? How will the mutual relationship of care between the meeting and the larger Quaker community be present?

## Care of a Meetinghouse(s) (where applicable)

1. Is there enough of the meeting community available to have a meaningful Meeting for Business? What are the resources available in the wider Quaker community to support the decisions that need to be

made for the meeting?

2. Are there items in the meetinghouse that it would be meaningful to donate? (Donate to \_\_\_\_\_?)
3. What values are important in stewarding the transition of the meetinghouse?
4. How will the transitioning of the meetinghouse happen? Is there guidance within *Faith and Practice* to guide this process? Are there individuals/committees to help with this process?
5. Will the ownership of the meetinghouse return to the yearly meeting? If the meetinghouse is sold, what will the meeting do with the proceeds of the sale? Is there a spiritual legacy in this transition?
6. How will the community listen spiritually throughout this process?

## Care of Cemeteries

- How will the care of the cemetery be transitioned?

## Care of Finances

1. Are there individuals or committees within the yearly meeting that can help guide the financial decisions/implications of the transition of the meeting?
2. Are there designated funds?
3. How will any remaining funds be expended?

## Role of the Quarterly/Regional Meeting

- How will the larger Quaker community be involved in the transition? (The Quarter/Region is responsible for saying that the process occurred with good order.)



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worship silently in a circle of chairs in the connected gathering room. That continued for 40+ years until the entire property was placed on the market in 2020. The discernment regarding stewardship of the property began more than a decade earlier and the property was placed on the market once before, though no buyer was found at that time.

The building and parsonage were rented to many local groups including AA and several other congregations. This enabled the meeting to remain financially strong. However, there came a moment when it became clear to all that the property had become a burden to its aging caretakers and to the meeting's financial realities. The loss of tenants during COVID was a tipping point. In 2020 a buyer—another church community—was found, and the sale was completed in 2022.

There is far more to the discernment that was required to find unity in the decision to sell a beloved property. The hope for outreach that would lead to growth combined with the sense that this “home” was part of our identity made these considerations emotional and challenging.

Then we were blessed with an offer from Oakwood Friends School to begin worshipping in their meeting room. The offer was broad and anticipated a close relationship between the school community and our meeting for many years into the future. This was “way opening” and our “meeting house” is now in the Main Building at Oakwood. We have several new members and attenders and virtual hybrid meetings have allowed us to have regular attendance from other states and countries.

Unity to sell the property was not found quickly. Many Friends grew up



Central Finger Lakes Meeting Friends, circa 1989. Photo provided by Astuti Bijlefeld.

with the Hooker Ave. meeting house as their spiritual home, experiencing First Day School and marriages and memorial services as the meeting greeted the new generations and said farewell to the old. There was always hope that our community outreach would attract new families and that the meeting would grow but this was not to be. It is important to note that while such decisions could have divided us and threatened the meeting, they did not. We gathered in this concern and labored together with trust and love until unity was found in the Light.

Poughkeepsie Friends Meeting has not been diminished by the sale of bricks, mortar and land. We have confirmed that community, worship, outreach and Spiritual growth all arise in the Light that Guides us, not in the place we gather. We are now fewer than 50 members, but we are trusting that free of the burdens of property we can shift our energies toward the ministry and works that define us in the world.



## Laying Down Central Finger Lakes Meeting

An Interview with  
Astuti Bijlefeld

Callie Janoff  
Brooklyn Meeting

**Callie:** Can you tell me how you're feeling about laying down Central Finger Lakes at this point?

**Astuti:** I've been working on organizing CFL meeting records, 35 years' worth. That has brought up a lot of memories. It's been a whole range of feelings. At this point, I can really say with a sense of relief that we finally got to this point, made this decision, that this is final, that we could share it with others. I was thinking earlier today that the term we use, “laying down the meeting,” feels very apt.

**Callie:** Not everybody knows the history of CFL, so I'm hoping you can share just a brief history of the meeting.

**Astuti:** CFL started as a small meeting

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in 1986 meeting at Friends' homes. I think as early as '87, we became a monthly meeting. We've continued meeting until the early 2020s, until about the beginning of the pandemic. This meeting has met in so many different locations. With not having our own meeting house, we have met in a number of school buildings and quite a number of churches.

We had a long history of meeting at homes which has always been a positive. When the meeting began, we often had at least as many children as adults, an incredible amount of energy and life. Lots of people have come and joined us for a time: people traveling, people here for school or for work. There's been a lot of changes in those 35 or so years. I think that the last few years as our numbers were declining, it got to be more difficult, more challenging to find a way forward to keep going.

**Callie:** Can you talk about what led up to the decision to lay down the meeting?

**Astuti:** Yes. There were many conversations with the few members who were still involved. It was a very difficult, painful decision and it took a lot of conversation over many months. Then earlier this year, we were really clear that it was time just to say publicly what had been evident for some years already: that this meeting is done. It's time to lay this meeting down.

Through the years, there had been several times that there were major shifts in the meeting; some long-term members left and we were really wondering what that would mean for us. We were able to regroup and new members or attenders joined and brought new energy, but it was very clear the last few years that that was not going to happen this time. It took a long time to get to that point, but by then it really was a relief.

**Callie:** You mentioned that there has been some conflict in the meeting. Can you say more about that?

**Astuti:** Sometimes I still wonder, could I, should I have done anything differently? In hindsight, the answer of course is yes. But at times of conflicts there was a sense of being caught off guard, feeling almost paralyzed, not knowing how to respond. I now realize that with all the effort and all the work that Friends in this meeting put into working for peace and witnessing for peace out in the world, I didn't give much thought to peace-building and reconciliation within the meeting where it was needed at least as much as out in the world.

The CFL Meeting, and all the Friends in it did really an enormous amount of witnessing for peace through the years. It is a very different challenge to practice it close to home. My feeling was: I don't know how, I don't know where to start.

**Callie:** Do you think that CFL has a legacy? If so, what is it, or how would you describe that legacy?

**Astuti:** Through the years, in all the different locations we met, a lot of seekers found a temporary home with us. It really has been wonderful to reflect back on that. I'm looking through all the minutes and records, all these names, all these people from all over, who sometimes for a few months, or years, were a regular part of the meeting and then moved on or found another faith community. Being welcoming of visitors and seekers was really a very important part of CFL's legacy.

For a number of years CFL was involved with the Geneva Memorial Day committee. Friends in the Meeting initiated the Faith Communities for


Peace segment of the Memorial Day parade. For several years, some other churches and faith communities joined us. That was a wonderful group of people who came together. To see both the organizers of the Memorial Day and most of the people lining the parade route being very receptive to that peace witness. I think that's a very good part of the legacy.

**Callie:** Is there anything else you would want to share about this experience?

**Astuti:** I appreciate you introducing the idea that meetings have a life cycle. I'm going through about 35 years of paperwork. We started out with a lot of kids and a lot of babies. We went through some enormous changes but also for the meeting itself, going from anything is possible, lots and lots of energy, lots of people to work on it, to just really running out of energy and saying, "We're just done." It gives permission to say, "Yes, it reached the end of that cycle."

And, it still is a loss. There are certainly still unanswered questions, should I have? Could I have? Why didn't I? All of those questions. Also that sense of, that's in the past.

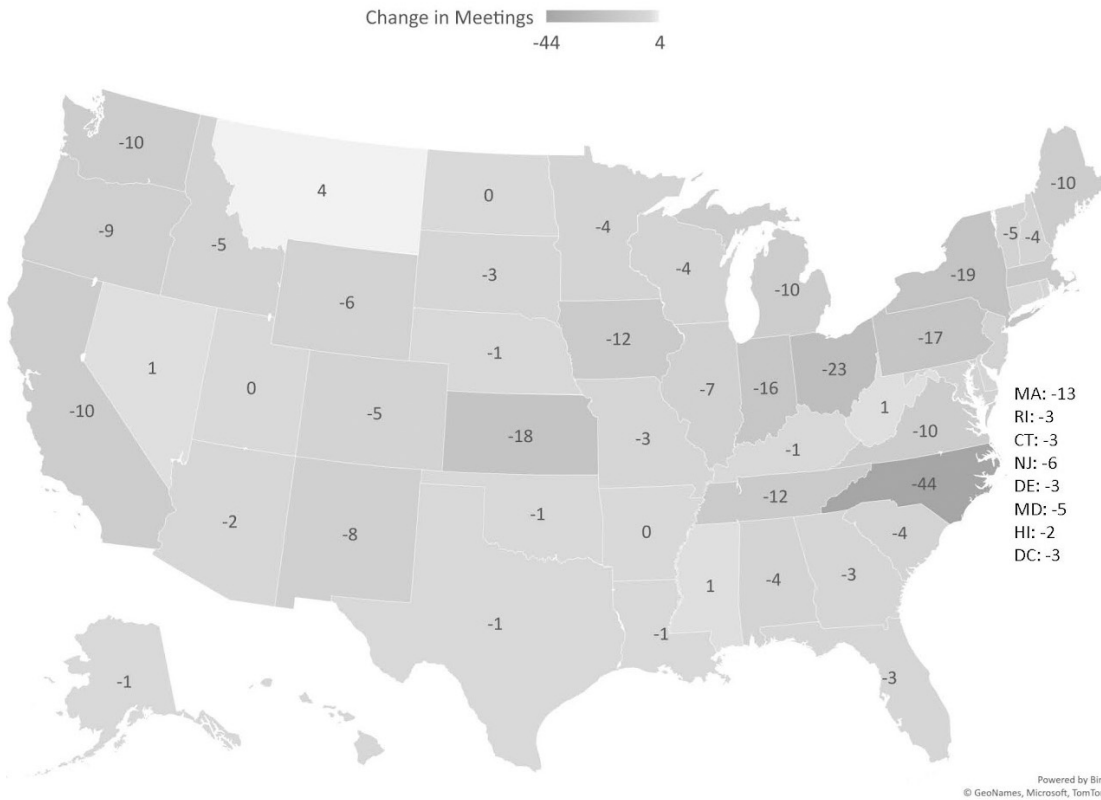
**Callie:** I feel like you've been very faithful to this meeting and to this process. I'm really moved by that.

**Astuti:** Thank you. These are things that we can talk about. It's not the first time that any of these questions have come up in meetings. It does help to hear from other Friends. 

**"Make provisions for the settlement of all outward affairs while in health, so that others may not be burdened and so that one may be freed to live more fully in the Truth that shall stand against all the entanglements, distractions, and confusions of our times."**

**—Epistle (paraphrased) from yearly meetings in Pennsylvania and the Jerseys, 1694-1695**

## Change in Number of Meetings from 2010 to 2020



## FWCC Quaker Census in the USA

Philip Maurer & Gil George  
FWCC

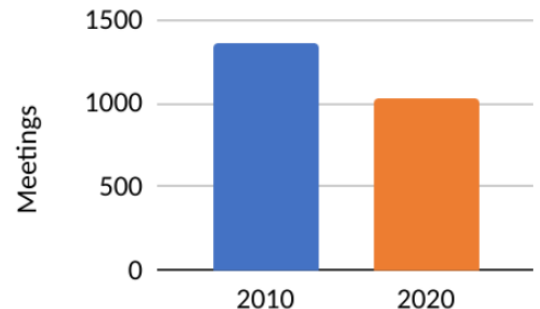
The Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) collects membership data from yearly meetings around the world. Initial research in 2021 suggests a decline of 24% in the number of Friends meetings and churches in the United States between 2010 and 2020.

Every ten years, FWCC Section of the Americas assists the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) to conduct the US Religion Census. This is separate from the federal government's population census, yet aims to be just as comprehensive in its reporting on religious congregations in the United States. Due to the pandemic, the data collection for the 2020 US Religion Census extended into early 2022.

From November 2021 until January 2022, FWCC gathered data on Friends of all branches throughout the United States. When possible, we received data on local congregations from the yearly meeting to which they belong. When that proved difficult, we contacted the local meetings themselves. Among the data we requested were counts of members and attenders. Some meetings reported both of these figures; some only reported one or the other. Some

### Changes Since 2010: Meetings

- 1,355 local meetings were counted in 2010
- 1,028 were counted in 2020
- **327 fewer** meetings were counted in 2020 than in 2010.
- That represents a **24% decline** in number of meetings



meetings didn't report any figures at all.

So, here are the important things to keep in mind as we look at this data:

While we did our best to contact Friends of every persuasion, there may be congregations that were not counted. This count only includes congregations we were already aware of, or ones we became aware of in the course of our data collection.

Much of the data we collected came from yearly meeting offices. In some cases, local congregations hadn't submitted updated counts to those offices for a year or two.

Among some yearly meetings that have split in the past ten years, we encountered some confusion about who was keeping track of membership data. We noticed that some meetings we know still exist weren't reported at all.

FWCC plans to continue this research and analysis in the coming year.

With those things in mind, here is a comparison of the 2010 and 2020 counts, below.



## Joining a Combined Meeting

Michael Booth

Westminster (UK) Meeting

My journey into Friends included becoming convinced while at a Quaker school in southern England. My actual convincement was sitting in worship at Fox's Pulpit on Firbank Fell, on a trip to 1652 Country to learn about the early days of Quakerism.

I started going to my nearest meeting for worship, which was Ilford Meeting in east London. Its formal name was Ilford and Barking Meeting, as it had recently amalgamated.

Barking Meeting had been in a nineteenth century meeting house, but more recently in the former caretaker's (janitor's) house which was on the same site. It had a burial ground which was now being used by the local council as a park. Burials included Elizabeth Fry and William Meade (one of the two Friends who in 1670 was found guilty of speaking in Gracechurch Street—the other was William Penn) so it was a meeting with a long history.

Ilford Meeting was founded in the early 20th century in a growing suburb of London: its building was nondescript and had little to attract new people. But Ilford was easier for Friends to reach, which is why Ilford Meetinghouse had been kept.

As a newcomer, and barely into my 20s, I saw a single group of about a dozen elderly retired Friends. But it became clear quite quickly that as a group they clearly knew who had been a Barking Friend and who had been an Ilford Friend. When it came to appointing Elders and Overseers, this distinction was important.

I like to think that over time Friends stopped thinking of

themselves as previously Barking Friends, or original Ilford Friends, but I don't think that they did. They were all elderly and as over the next few years they died, or became too frail to attend meeting, the meeting itself changed. By the time I moved away from that meeting after eight years, there was perhaps one or two of the original group left, but the size of the meeting had remained constant, so in their own quiet way, this group of Friends had welcomed newcomers and become a single community.

A few Friends from that meeting stand out in my memories:


Beatrice, who lived with her sister. She had become a Quaker against the wishes of her family. Whenever a Quaker visited her, her sister would leave the room and not acknowledge the visitor.

Bob, who only started coming to meeting after he had been widowed, as his wife would not have approved of him being a Quaker.

Amy, who was the clerk when I joined. She always came over as one of the older generation, a bit school-marm-ish, a maiden aunt, and very prim and proper. Amy ministered nearly every week from *Advices and Queries*. Later, when Amy's short-term memory had left her, she would sometimes read from *Advices and Queries*, and if no one else ministered in response, would reread the same portion. Later still, Amy would have forgotten what portion she had read, so if no one responded to her reading from *Advices and Queries*, she would then read a different portion.

In a larger meeting, this could have been a problem. But with Ilford and Barking often being lucky to have ten Friends present, we were able to take it in our stride. In some ways it was easier for the meeting once Amy started reading different portions.

I do remember one Sunday when there were just five of us at meeting. Three fell asleep, and Amy and I just looked at each other, and silently decided not to wake them up.

Each of these were Friends who would be a stalwart of any meeting, and happily did have the courage and contentment to belong to a small and aging meeting, being part of a quiet witness in a largely Quaker-free area of London. The meeting has since been laid down. It probably lasted for as long as it did because of the commitment of Friends like these. 

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## Growing Our Quaker Community

Margery Post Abbott, Carl Abbott, Chris Cradler, & Larry Ferguson

Multnomah (Ore.) & Bridge City (Ore.) Meetings

It has been 25 years since members of Portland, Oregon's Multnomah Monthly Meeting (MMM) decided to form a new worshiping community and 18 years since that core grew into Bridge City Friends Meeting (BCFM).

In the early 1990s, MMM was outgrowing its space in a twice remodeled industrial building. The upshot was a four-year envisioning process with no resolution. MMM looked at larger buildings ranging from churches to a derelict school. We considered and rejected a proposal to divide into three separate meetings for different sectors of the city. We engaged in joint discernment with a progressive Jewish congregation that was also looking for better space, but both sides decided it was better to remain friends than partners.

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Then, over a few months in 1996-97, a core of experienced members came to clarity to start a worship group that would not share the building. In 2004, BCFM became Portland's second unprogrammed meeting. There were regrets and tears, but no battling personalities, no standing in the way, and no fights over money. The step was healthy for both the new and the old meeting.

### Formatting Bridge City Friends Meeting

After the years of indecisive visioning, a Friend stood at business meeting to suggest the need for a new Friends meeting in Portland. That catalyzed planning among a core of interested Friends. MMM minuted this process as "setting off" a meeting, and these "set off" Friends felt energized with this opportunity to develop a separate identity, sense of purpose, and culture. They envisioned:

- worshiping in a smaller group with a close sense of community and deeper spiritual connections
- meaningful religious education programs for children (including Biblical literacy) and Junior Friends, and their presence in meeting for worship
- active participation in many aspects of sustaining a spiritual community beyond weekly worship (such as committee work, intergenerational gatherings, and service projects)

Two months later the group began meeting weekly at a Friend's nearby home. They offered children's program from day one, serving to bond the adults as well as the young ones. BCWG created committee structure as needed, moving to rental space within months.

The creative process that brings such purposeful energy together among Friends exhilarated us.

The close and loving nature of our friendships grew, including stronger connections between children and adults. Most striking to us: with deeper spiritual interactions we developed a generous tolerance that honored the wide diversity of religious and spiritual practice amongst us, spanning Wiccan to Christocentric to world religions experiences.

BC Friends became aware that some old friends at Multnomah felt pain and loss, exacerbated by our joy and excitement, and worked hard at compassion in interactions with MMM. As Bridge City became a recognized monthly meeting, the two clerks worked closely to be tender to the multitudes of decisions and feelings this final separating entailed, particularly membership transfers and division of funds.

### Building the Change

Friends often cite the biblical promise "Behold I set before thee an open door. Knock and it shall be opened." At times it felt more like repeatedly kicking until it popped open, but eventually way did open for Bridge City and Multnomah to formally minute that they are separate monthly meetings within North Pacific Yearly Meeting.

Many from MMM felt excitement that this was the culmination of natural growth of unprogrammed Friends in Portland. The meetings are different in size and distinct in personality. Multnomah has been the larger worshipping community which tends to attract more visitors and new people. Bridge City's smaller membership allows them to foster a community of close relationships.

As the new worshipping community began to grow and Bridge City became a preparative meeting, we experimented with committees that included participants from both

group, most importantly the Committee for Ministry and Pastoral Care. After a few years it was clear that each meeting needed to focus on their own evolving needs.

We shared financial resources. MMM's small building fund and general fund were divided in proportion to the number of members in each meeting. The two meetings jointly administer a fund that supports the spiritual life of unprogrammed Friends in Portland by paying for retreats, spiritual development for individuals, and expenses of Friends traveling in the ministry.

The change has an unexpected bonus for Multnomah. Because many experienced Friends and former clerks joined Bridge City, space opened for a new generation of leadership. We learned that there were skillful, grounded Friends willing to step forward.

In sum, both meetings have been enriched by our Friendly separation. *Margery Post Abbott and Carl Abbott are forty-year members of Multnomah Meeting. Chris Cradler and Larry Ferguson were MMM members who became founding members of Bridge City Meeting.*



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## A New Meeting House in Devon: Ashburton Quaker Meeting

Pip Harris

Ashburton (UK) Meeting

### The seeding

"Totnes" is a small market town in South West England, based at an important crossing point of the River Dart. Together with the nearby Dartington estate, it has an interna-

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tional reputation for its lively and diverse community. Not surprisingly the Quaker meeting has grown in the last forty years, and is large for the size of the town.

People came to Totnes to attend meeting for worship from a wide surrounding area. The geography of South Devon meant that there was a noticeable cluster of Friends living in and around the neighbouring town of

Ashburton, about nine miles away.

The holding of a Quaker wedding in Ashburton, with the necessary meetings for worship held in the weeks preceding it, was the necessary stimulus for a small mid-week meeting to start. This took the form of a public “satellite meeting” of Totnes, using a tucked-away room of a local children’s nursery, with the tiny chairs part of an admittedly rather uncom-

fortable seating plan! The supportive presence of a Totnes elder living in Ashburton, known by townsfolk as “Quaker Mary,” was important in building a sense of community.

Four years passed, and a disused chapel came up for sale in Ashburton. The chapel had been used as a wood store for over fifty years and was in a state of disrepair. Most

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## Stages of a New Meeting Start



## Friends General Conference New Meetings Project

Several years ago, the Friends General Conference New Meetings Project produced this visual about the stages of starting a new meeting. What is your favorite part? What about it makes you curious? How do you think it would be the same, or different, if the new meeting were online?



## Three Growing Stories

Where are Friends' meetings and churches growing? Lots of places, actually, but especially in Africa and Central/South America. What does that growth look like? Usually, it looks like solid engagement with the immediate needs of the community, especially support of younger people. Take a look at these three international growth stories. How is each responsive to the culture and needs of the community? As you read, please be aware that in every case, local Friends are taking the primary leadership roles in growing their communities.

### Nikki Holland, Belize Friends Church

Over the past couple of months, we have conducted our first ever membership class for Belize Friends Church. Eight young people completed the course and they decided that they all want to become members and join Chris, our pastor-in-training, as the first Belizean Quakers since Sadie Vernon. This is a truly amazing thing for me. When I asked them last week what they had gained from the class, some of them said that they'd had their eyes opened about ways they can follow Christ in their lives, they enjoyed learning a little about Quaker history and how our church is related to Quaker churches around the world, they felt closer to God, they felt more able to hear from God, and they felt more aware of ways to make healthy choices in their lives. I can't imagine a more successful result from a membership class! I feel so lucky to have been able to participate in this historic class.

### John Moru, South Sudan

At the church, I teach a class in reading and writing in the Toposa language. The Toposa people read the Turkana Bible, which is why I find it easy to teach their language. Pray for these committed people who desire to know how to read the Bible. Their relatives are fighting why they have left traditional beliefs and values, and why they have given their children to school.

### Nicolas Otieno, Tanzania

Since time immemorial, the gospel of the grace of God has been preached through different methods to different people from diversities of cultural settings and personalities, depending on the circumstance and the targeted audience. Dar es Salaam is a principal commercial city of Tanzania and a de-facto seat of most government institutions. As a major sea port for the country, the city is densely populated with more than six million cosmopolitan people, intermingled tribes from different corners of the country.

As our Lord Jesus Christ walked the dusty roads of Nazareth and even beyond, so have we. As a church, we walked through market places and everywhere and we met all manner of people whom we could not meet in our pulpit. The Apostle Paul told Timothy to do the job of evangelizing by taking the gospel on the playgrounds of the inner cities and streets. The responses have been very positive as we continue doing follow-up missions. Some families are joining. Several people were touched by the messages and deliverance services. The Holy Spirit led us and we followed.

We will also be launching boat evangelism, so that we may reach out to fishermen and fish dealers around the beaches along the ocean.



*continued from page 10*

importantly it seemed affordable. What started as a coffee-time “whim” and discussion quickly developed into a clear leading. Friends felt that the purchase of the chapel would allow a more obvious Quaker presence to be built in the town.

### **Fortuitous events supporting the planting**

Some years previously a Friend had left a substantial legacy to Quakers, with a hope that they might buy a meeting-house for another South Devon town, nearby Newton Abbot. Friends there had discerned that this wasn't what they wished and fortuitously the monies were awaiting a decision as to an alternative use. Funds were sufficient to cover the costs of restoring the chapel in a very basic form. The area meeting approved the use of the funds to purchase the chapel for Friends in Ashburton, carry out basic renovations, and start plans for a full refurbishment.

### **Growing the vision for the building**

The building was purchased and Friends started meeting in the shell of the building. But how would the space be developed? Ashburton Friends looked at three options: from a minimal approach to a complete remodelling. An architect sympathetic to Quaker values was chosen. He attended meetings for worship in order to better understand how the building would be used. The process wasn't without its tensions, and area meeting Friends helped with this challenging discernment. A “threshing meeting” was held, to help inform the process. Friends also sought the views of the wider town community through a survey and open day. This information fed into the vision for the building.

An area meeting Friend with wide experience in sustainable build-

ings helped to talk through realistic options. This allowed Friends to balance the ideal with the budget and practical issues. The accepted plan took the form of the creation of “a building within a building,” with a floor being added to the building. This created a flexible, two-story space which included a room for children to use as well as a more flexible hiring [rental] space. This structure allows for a lot of insulation which reduces heat loss. A gifted Friend with an engineering background was on hand to supervise the work, carried out by a talented team of local builders.

### **Growing the community**

Through the use of flexible area meeting funds and good planning, Quakers have a visible presence in Ashburton. In the ten years since the building has been completed, there has been a pleasing increase in people coming to meeting for worship. Some have passed through as part of their spiritual exploration and journeying, and others have stayed and taken the step to become members.... There are now around 30 Friends (members and attenders) linked to the meeting. Usually 15 chairs are placed out on a Sunday. Attendance varies from single figures, to needing more chairs to be added to the circle.

One challenge for the meeting is the number of “experienced” Friends committed to a longer-term relationship with Quakers and the larger proportion of seekers who are beginning an exploration of what Quakers may, or may not, mean for them. A relatively inexperienced clerking team grew in confidence, supported by an experienced clerk. Recently the question of how the meeting fulfills its eldership and pastoral care has been challenging Friends and they are considering a new form of appointments.

## **Grief Stages and Change Theory When Considering the Life of a Meeting**

**Helen Mullin**  
Brooklyn Meeting

Elisabeth Kubler Ross's study of persons who are diagnosed with terminal illnesses was presenting in her book “On Death and Dying” written in 1969. The stages of grief: shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (DABDA). These are end-of-life markers for anyone in the dying process. The stages of grief may be helpful when we consider the laying down of our meetings.

The meetings will go through similar states. Some statements at each stage could be:

**Denial:** “No, if we just work harder at outreach and get more members.” “The yearly meeting can help us with advancement and recruitment of more members.” “We ought to invite some of the young friends to join us.”  
**Anger:** “Why did everyone leave us? How did we become so few? Why?” “This meeting cannot die! It is so needed in the community!”

**Bargaining:** “Should we borrow from the bank to maintain our buildings?” “We just need to persist for a couple more months.” “If we stay here, they will come here.” “If we repair the boiler and such, more people will come back.” “Maybe we can do more to attract people.”

**Depression:** “Why bother going to the meetinghouse this week, when no one new will be there?” “I sit in the meeting house and I get so sad at all the people who have died and are no longer with us. It is so sad!” “Why

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do we even try to keep the building open?” “We don’t proselytize. Maybe we should?”

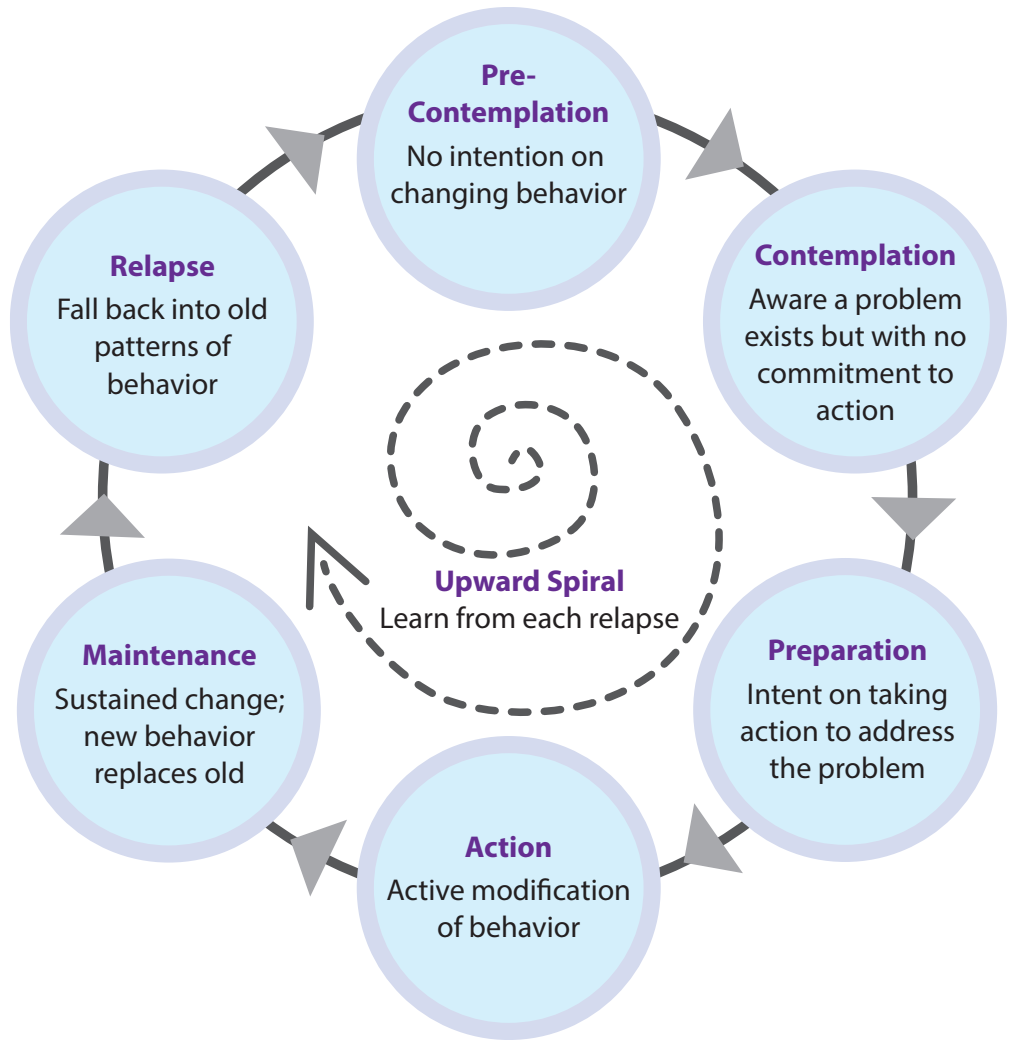
**Acceptance:** “I recognize that the meeting is not coming back to life.”

As individuals or as meetings, when we go through these stages, it may be helpful not to “blame, shame or guilt” anyone who comes or chooses not to come to meeting. In many meetings, the members are more aged and can no longer serve with the same fervor. Using blame, shame or guilt will not lengthen the life of the meeting; they would probably shorten it.

As meetings deal with dwindling numbers, changing from a monthly meeting to perhaps a worship group may be an intermediate stage before the meeting’s discernment about laying itself down. Whether using Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief or beginning to consider the questions, Prochaska and DiClemente’s **Stages of Change** may assist a meeting. They are: 1. Pre-contemplation; 2. Contemplation; 3. Preparation; 4. Action; 5. Relapse; and 6. Maintenance. Developed for work with recovery from addiction, the meeting’s journey with the decision to lay itself down may be helped by the stages.

In the language of Quakers, these stages might be defined as the following.

**Pre-Contemplation:** We believe that the meeting is thriving and is healthy despite the dwindling numbers in attendance. The hybrid Zoom meeting has brought back long absent friends and even some friends who have moved a great distance away from the meeting. We are doing OK. The pre-contemplation stage means perceiving that all is well.



**Contemplation:**

This is the beginning to recognize that things are changing. There are fewer persons able to serve on committees. We can’t expect those who are joining by Zoom to do all the work of the meeting. We are beginning to see that there may be problems. We acknowledge that there is a problem but are unsure of how to proceed. This might be the beginning of a discernment process about what to do. Often here is where some paralysis might occur, because of thinking like, this meeting has been serving the community for several decades (or centuries). How could we even begin to think about laying it down?

**Preparation:** Preparation is not making a change; it is the stage where

a meeting gets ready and prepares to make a change. In the world of Quakerism, this will be one of the longer stages. This is the time for discernment; for making a plan; for exploring our options. Again, at this stage, we are accepting that there needs to be a change and making a plan for how to proceed with this change. We may experience a sense of loss of the community, loss of purpose, loss of continuity. It means we let go of the things that once were important but can no longer be maintained. Here we determine what will happen with assets, property, land, and things. Here is where the legacy of the meeting may be discussed. Here is where a plan

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to sell or reallocate resources might happen.

**Action:** Action is our next stage in the change process. This is where the change takes place. It is where the meeting is laid down and the preparation plans are implemented. The decisions having been discerned are approved at a meeting for worship with a concern for business. Here is where legacy funds/assets are managed. It may be a bit of sliding back to the preparation stage: two steps forward, one step back. The meeting may decide to change its designation from a monthly meeting to a worship group/preparatory meeting under the care of another monthly meeting. The meeting might decide to combine its meeting with another meeting. Those actions take place here.

**Relapse:** This stage may be like a sliding back on the decision made above. In Quaker process, once a minute is approved, the actions start happening. Someone who was not at that meeting for business but is at the next one wants to revisit the decision. As the actions take place, there may be self-doubt or second guessing of the community decision.

**Maintenance:** As with any change, there may be some doubts after the final decision and once actions are starting to take place. Maintenance stages involve making reminders of what and why this action is taking place. It may involve taking time to reassure those not present at the meeting of approval.

As we age, and some of our meeting consider a change of their status from a regional meeting to a monthly meeting to a worship group, all of these stages are helpful in framing the process. Quaker process can often be a slow process in most deliberations. This is one Quaker

action that does require deliberation, discernment and final unity. Consider using the stages of grief and/or the Change Theory as a guide for how to proceed in Spirit and in truth. 

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## Grief, Not Shame

Emily Provance

15th Street Meeting

The stories we tell about endings matter. Here's one that I've heard told:

*Years ago, there was a Quaker meeting that got smaller and smaller until, finally, there was only one remaining member, an old man who continued to come to worship every First Day, always bringing along his sheepdog. The old man would open up the meetinghouse and go inside, taking the bench closest to the wood stove, and sitting in silent prayer for an hour. His dog would settle down at his feet.*

*Then, the old man died. (He was presumably buried by distant relatives who somehow didn't notice the existence of the dog, but that part doesn't come into the story.)*

*Despite the death of the old man, the sheepdog continued to arrive at the meetinghouse every First Day in time for worship. Not having thumbs to open the door, he was fated to stand on the porch, whining.*

*It so happened that, one particular Sunday, a young man who was new to town noticed the dog standing on the porch and scratching at the meetinghouse door. The next Sunday, he noticed the same dog at the same time, and—figuring that the dog must have some good reason for wanting to enter—he went over to the meetinghouse and let him in. The sheepdog entered and immediately settled on the floor next to the bench closest to the wood stove. Figuring the dog would*

*probably be cold, the young man started a fire, and as the room warmed cheerfully, he himself settled down for a few minutes of quiet. A peaceful feeling came over his soul.*

*The next week, the young man brought his wife, and the week after that, they invited some neighbors. By summertime, two dozen people—and one sheepdog—gathered for silent worship every First Day, and so the meeting was revived.*

This is a fabulous story, and we can enjoy the humor and celebrate the concept of the unlikely hero. However, there's an excellent chance that most Quaker meetings will not be revitalized by a sheepdog. Relying entirely on a last-minute miracle most often leads to meetings that are closed at the point that the remaining members (if there are any) don't have enough energy or resources to do the work of closing well. The result is long legal entanglements, resources such as money and property that wind up being used for things that might or might not line up with the meeting's prior ministries, and little or no cohesive effort to preserve a record of the meeting's history.

The idea of closing a meeting can feel extremely hard, especially if we have been part of that community for a long time. Maybe we remember becoming members of the meeting. Maybe we met loved ones there or watched our children play on the grounds. The meeting might have held our marriage under its care or might have arranged the memorial service for a parent or close friend. We may have put many hours of work into the meeting for years, maybe even decades.

Grief is an expected response, and we can honor that grief by making space for it. Friends are likely to need

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opportunities to share memories, to worship together and in the familiar physical meeting space, to touch the objects that have been in the building, and to make decisions—not rushed—about where and how things should be moved, donated, or sold. Members of the meeting, or people who have long been familiar with the meeting, might want to record some of their favorite stories about it. This recording does not need to be polished or formal as long as it works. The act itself is the most important part of honoring the meeting's history.

But sometimes, when Friends

consider closing a meeting, they also experience feelings of shame. It can help to remember that *all meetings die*. If our meeting comes to its natural end during our lifetime, that is not an indication that we have done something wrong. It is simply a call to good and faithful discernment: how do we make space for what God does next?

*This article is one of a series of essays on laying down meetings. You can access the entire series here: [quakeremily.wordpress.com/resources-for-quaker-meetings/end-of-life-for-meetings/](http://quakeremily.wordpress.com/resources-for-quaker-meetings/end-of-life-for-meetings/)*



## A Good Friday Blessing for You

### The Good Friday Collaborative

You who are lost, who find yourselves in the unfamiliar lands that loss forms in our lives. You are the ones who know intimately what it is to be unsettled, to grieve, to wait.

You who ache for the past: for the sights and sounds and smells of a community long gone.

You who wonder if resurrection will ever come.

Remember that there is no place you can be that isn't already holy, no distance you cross without the Divine meeting you.

Remember the people who have shaped you, who gave you an inheritance not of buildings and stone but of faith and love.

Remember that this day—this very day—is sacred, just as it is.

May you know that grief is offering

enough, and that there are others who wander this land, too.

May you find each other. May you weep together.

May you be a living letter to the next generation—from all the saints who have come before.

May you see glimpses of newness and of grace, even in unexpected places.

Beloved, this day is for you.

However you find yourself on this day, may you remember that you are a part of this story.

The beautiful and the broken, and that which is not yet finished.

This day is holy. You are holy.

Take courage, dear ones, and place your trust in the story that does not end on this day, but waits in stillness for resurrection.

*This is a blessing from the Good Friday Collaborative, an ecumenical group that works with churches at the end of their life cycles. For more, visit [www.goodfridaycollaborative.com](http://www.goodfridaycollaborative.com)*



## Gathering Wisdom Beyond Friends

In January 2022, a small international group of Friends gathered on Zoom to hear from **Marilyn Fiddmont** (Christian Church Foundation, Disciples of Christ) and **David Schoen** (United Church of Christ). These individuals both have decades of experience supporting congregations through closure. Marilyn and David talked about their call to this ministry, the joys they find in doing it, the challenges, and the practical lessons learned. Afterward, the group reflected together on what had been heard.

Here are some highlights of the ecumenical conversation:

Data shows that the normal life span of a congregation could be analogous to the life span of a human being. This isn't something we say often. The expectation is that meetings normally last for three hundred years or perhaps last forever.

Our visitors talked about how important relationship-building is to the process. Even while a community is in a state of dissolution, relationships can continue to be built with the people involved even as the institution is coming to its conclusion.

Let's think more broadly about the possibilities: not just a meeting being laid down or continuing as-is, but what are the options in between?

Friends are going to have to look at supporting online congregations because that's the direction some groups are going. It may be what groups do now instead of ending their meetings entirely. It is even possible that the brick and mortar model will change so much that it disappears in all cases except a few.

Meetings have sacred stories that

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shouldn't be lost. The closure of a church or meeting is not the end of its vision/calling. That can be carried on in another way in the community, monetarily and/or spiritually.

We all need to get up our courage and have some tough conversations: where will our meetings be in five years? We don't have a hierarchical construct, so how will we do that? What about groups that are totally independent, unaffiliated with any yearly meeting or other group larger than themselves? Who will help them and bear witness to their stories?

Urban churches are failing faster than rural ones in some denominations. Is that true for us?

Let's remember also to pay attention to places where there is room for new spaces and things opening up.

In other denominations, the congregational closure ministry is connected with the financial institutions; the people who do this work also work with endowments, insurance, pastor retirement plans, and so forth. Is that the right place for this work in our institutions? Why or why not?

Many meetings don't feel a close connection to yearly meetings. There's a lack of relationship and even sometimes enmity with the large organization and/or nearby local meetings. There are meetings that are quite happy to flourish or struggle without asking for help or relationship.

There is probably room for intentionally growing relationships between meetings that are geographically near one another, regardless of whether they are technically connected by an institutional structure: what are your needs, and what is your vision? That may be a good conversation to start.

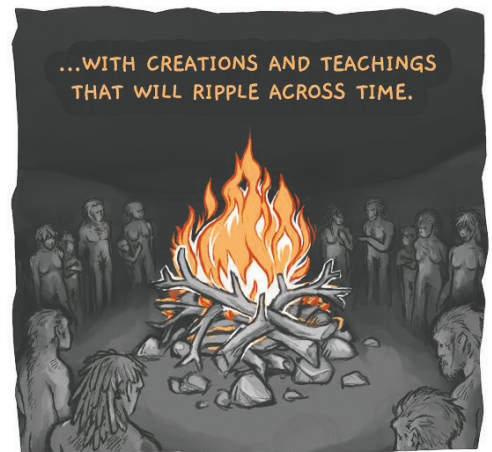
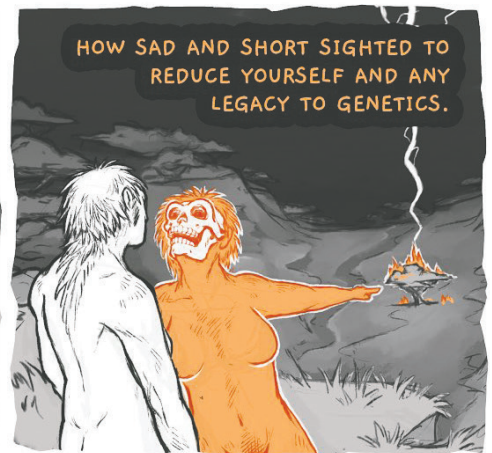
Marilyn told us that a meeting-

house is a "third space" for a community. It can be a safe space. Even if a meeting is very small, if it is open for other groups to use, it may become seen as a safe space for groups to meet. Wonder how prevalent it is that people would see a church or Friends' meeting as a neutral and safe place for community to gather? Consider the neighborhood impact as part of

the ministry of the meeting.

Remember the spiritual aspects: don't strand Friends, care for them, make sure they have a place to worship.

We have so much to learn from other traditions...and probably wisdom that we could share with them, as well. How do we connect more frequently like this?



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**New York Yearly Meeting**  
*The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)*

Articles originally appeared in the September 2022 issue of *Spark*, the NYYM newsletter. For the PDF of this booklet or the full issue visit [nyym.org/Life-Cycle-of-Meetings](http://nyym.org/Life-Cycle-of-Meetings). For more information, contact Sarah Way, *Spark* editor, at [communications@nyym.org](mailto:communications@nyym.org).

New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) is a gathering of Quaker meetings and worship groups in New York state, northern and central New Jersey, and southwestern Connecticut. Visit [www.nyym.org](http://www.nyym.org). NYYM Office: 15 Rutherford Place, New York, NY 10003 • 212-673-5750