

Faithful Always: Transitions and Endings for Quaker Meetings and Churches Near the End of the Life Cycle

EDITORS:

Dorothy Grannell and Emily Provance

ADDITIONAL CONVERSATION PARTNERS, DISCERNMENT, AND RESEARCH:

Michael Booth

Callie Janoff

Robin Mohr

Helen Mullin

Anne Pomeroy

Colin Saxton

Kathy Slattery

Nia Thomas

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Introduction

This is a resource for anyone, but especially for the midwives—that is, the accompaniers—the clerks, trustees, yearly meeting staff, or other ministers who find themselves walking alongside meetings that are closing or in discernment about closing.

The end of a meeting's life cycle can feel frightening or difficult. But it can also be a well-deserved rest at the end of a long and faithful journey. Just as we do for the end of a human life, we can plan ahead for the end of a meeting's life, considering the meeting's legacy and making decisions about the distribution of resources. We can also honor the life of a meeting, celebrating its ministries and giving ourselves space and permission to grieve. This booklet is designed to support that planning, honoring, and grieving.

We begin with a few articles for reading and discussion.

“Facing Hard Truths” by Robin Mohr points out recent trends within the Religious Society of Friends and some of the ways in which our usual systems may struggle to meet the needs of meetings at the end of their life cycles. The article also introduces the idea of hospice for meetings.

Following that, a series of essays from Emily Provance speaks to specific phases and aspects of discernment regarding a meeting's life cycle, including what a meeting might do if it's nearing its end but isn't quite there yet. The series concludes with exploration of what must be addressed after a meeting is certain it's closing.

Following the articles, there are four case studies. The stories are each written quite differently, but there's something to be learned from all of them. In reading and discussing the case studies, you might find some approaches resonate more with you and your group than others. That's a good thing. There is no single best way to do this work.

The booklet ends with queries for meetings in transition and a list of additional resources.

How can this booklet best be used? There are many options. A local meeting, regional meeting, or yearly meeting might work through the booklet from front to back while reflecting on the group's condition. Or a group might select one or two readings that feel relevant and leave the rest for another time. An individual Friend might refer to it while walking alongside a meeting that is closing. Another might read through for help in finding the best way to initiate a conversation about a meeting's end. Hopefully, some Friends will read this booklet many years before their meetings reach the end of their life cycle. Just as it is in end-of-life planning for people, there are certain preparatory steps that are much easier to make when the meeting still has plenty of energy.

Nothing in this book is intended to encourage any particular meeting or church to be laid down. Ultimately, the question of when it is time is resolved by discernment and the leadings of the Holy Spirit. What this booklet can do, we hope, is make that discernment less frightening and illuminate some of the ways in which we can prepare for faithfulness in our endings.

Facing Hard Truths

Robin Mohr

This article was originally published in the April 2020 issue of Friends Journal.

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 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.

Quaker leaders often think we don't have enough time, energy, or money to deal with the living and growing meetings, but the weight of avoiding the frail and dying meetings among us also takes a toll. The "faithful remnant" is a narrative that is valuable and inspiring to many people. Yet it can be a story we hide behind to avoid hard conversations. We have to stop fooling ourselves that miraculous stories we've heard are going to be repeated in other cases. The demographic trends of rural locations and the growth, decline, and spread of cities are forces beyond the control of the Religious Society of Friends. And the cost of trying to resolve financial, legal, and pastoral issues after-the-fact is higher than dealing with them in good order.

Facing the existential questions sooner rather than later is one of the core purposes of religion and of religious communities. From the early days of the Religious Society of Friends, Quakers have offered practical advice about preparation for death. The yearly meetings of Pennsylvania and the Jerseys wrote this (paraphrased) epistle in 1694 and 1695:

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.

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. I think the people who have been actively involved in the hospice movement have a lot to teach us.

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.

Carl Magruder, a hospice chaplain in California and a Quaker, says that for human beings, dying is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be horrible. He outlined for me some of the important questions for opening this conversation: What is your understanding of what is happening here? What do you hope will happen? What do you want to happen next? Another question that I have heard from Friends with experience in this area is: what do you want your legacy to be?

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. Unsurprisingly, our books of Faith and Practice also have practical, procedural advices for the setting up and laying down of monthly meetings.

In many yearly meetings, it is the responsibility of the quarterly meeting to lay down a monthly meeting. But in many places, the quarterly meeting structures have atrophied so they may not

have the capacity to handle all the issues envisioned in Faith and Practice. Even where the quarterly meeting is still functioning, its clerk probably didn't sign up for that amount of labor and unresolved conflict.

So it may be that the yearly meeting should coordinate the provision of legal aid and pastoral care. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Property Committee learned about a burial ground in the state of Maryland that had been abandoned after the monthly meeting closed more than 100 years before. The yearly meeting was still legally responsible for the property, but the local township had a much stronger interest in maintaining the site. The resolution was that the yearly meeting paid to erect a fence around the portion of the lot where the graves were, then conveyed the entire lot to the township. The town now maintains the lot as a peaceful public park and is responsible for mowing the grass and maintaining the fence. This is a positive outcome all around, but it took a lot of work on the part of a few people, both paid staff and volunteers, from the yearly meeting to sort it out. However, their example may be useful to other Friends who encounter similar issues.

Wilmington Yearly Meeting and other Friends in the state of Ohio are the beneficiaries of research done by Tom Hill, a lawyer and Quaker historian, who tracked down all the meetinghouses and other real estate property ever owned by Quakers in the state. Because of this work in the 1990s, Wilmington Yearly Meeting has current records of all the property in its legal care. Hill has published research on all the meetings in North America which is ongoing and freely available to Friends. It doesn't have all the deeds in other states, but it is a great place to start if it's been determined that someone in a yearly meeting ought to know the answers to these questions.

The pastoral care requirements for those Friends who are the last members of a dying meeting will be enormous. These Friends, often stubborn personalities, are often carrying the weight of generations of commitment to a building; a graveyard; a name; or just the memories of the meeting, the town, or their family. Sometimes someone from outside the group has to name the situation and ask: "What is your understanding of what is happening here? What do you want the legacy of this meeting to be?" One way to start is by asking the last few members of a meeting who they want to organize their memorial meetings. We can talk about writing a memorial minute or holding a memorial meeting for a monthly meeting, so that the stories can be told, the lessons learned, and the grieving honored.

I don't wish to hasten the death of the Religious Society of Friends or of any particular meeting. I spend most of my time working to help Quakers and Quaker meetings and churches thrive in the twenty-first century. I am an active member of a local meeting. I travel widely among Friends. I frequently talk with leaders of Quaker institutions across all the branches of Friends. And I believe that the world needs what Quakers have to offer.

However, I am serious about acknowledging that a monthly meeting that consists of fewer than five people or that doesn't meet weekly for worship or monthly for business is already not fully functioning. A meeting that cannot imagine itself taking in new members or caring for a wedding is already not capable of carrying on all the functions of a monthly meeting. If there is property

involved, then the critical mass number is much higher. If the remaining active members are all over the age of 70 or 80, they won't be able to continue to pretend much longer. They may continue to worship together as often as they are now, with joy and faithfulness and mutual support, but their memberships should be transferred to a larger, more stable monthly meeting. The arrangements for any property or other assets they hold should be made as soon as possible. Some of this may be clearly stated in Faith and Practice or in the incorporation documents of the meeting. Just as writing a will or estate plan or an advance directive for healthcare doesn't hasten death for an individual, writing an end-of-life care plan for a meeting does not contribute to its demise. Like with childbirth, we don't always get what we plan for, but if we know what our options are, share our hopes with our loved ones, and put it in writing, we are more likely to get more of what we want. The time and money and emotion required to make an end-of-life care plan for a meeting are less than the cost of resolving matters after the fact.

Friends at quarterly and yearly meetings also need to assess if the remaining people at a monthly meeting are still capable of making competent decisions. Or has it gone too far?

A few years before my father's death, I had a painful though common experience. My sister and I had to tell my father that he couldn't drive anymore. We had to say it more than once, and we had to support my mother's enforcement of it when my sister and I were not present. She really didn't want to drive him around; they had always done it the other way. It was really hard for all of us. I had to say, "You can't do this thing that you used to be really good at anymore. Your judgment isn't working as well as it used to. I know you don't want to hear this, but it's my job to say it." The risk of him hurting someone else was too great.

Likewise, in some cases, facing the hard truth will require the assertion of responsibility and authority by the quarterly and yearly meetings, which is very difficult for some. But like taking the car keys from your elderly father when it is no longer safe for him to drive, it has to be done. The damage that will happen if we don't lay down a meeting is less immediately life-threatening than an out-of-control automobile, but it can be time- and money-consuming. It's necessary to retrieve the meetings' records before they are discarded along with the rest of the contents of the garage, to identify where account numbers are kept, who has the key to the safe deposit box, and who has the copy of the deed. There is a continued liability risk for people injured on abandoned properties.

Some cautions need to be in place. Attention must be paid to the temptations to take control of other people's assets for less than altruistic reasons. Friends are not immune to old rivalries, pettiness, and the distractions of wealth, racism, and sexism. So a broader attention to this question is healthy and may prevent benign neglect turning into malignant caregiving.

So who will help yearly meeting leaders start talking about this with more honesty and less anxiety? This is not a one-size-fits-all situation. Here are some suggestions I can think of to help. I invite others to come up with more:

- Friends who have gone into hospice chaplaincy could serve as a resource for developing language and procedures for the various stages of grief and release.

- Yearly meetings in the same state could share information about their state's legal requirements for the transfer of assets.
- Pastoral care resources developed in each branch of Friends could be shared with other yearly meetings in the same worship tradition.
- There could be a network of Friends who feel called to this work to know and support one another across geographic and institutional boundaries and to collect anecdotes and examples of processes that work or don't work.
- The associations of yearly meetings could be a support to the yearly and quarterly meeting leaders who will have to face situations that have been decades in the making.

There are also resources we can turn to in this work:

The Quaker historical libraries publish best practice recommendations for archives, including electronic records of minutes, etc., for example, swarthmore.edu/friends-historical-library/donating-to-collections.

New England Yearly Meeting just published an expanded section titled "Dying, Death, and Bereavement" in its Faith and Practice.

New York Yearly Meeting's Aging Resources, Consultation, Help (ARCH) program provides support for yearly meeting Friends in their journey of growing older as a community: nnyym.org/content/arch.

Tom Hill's index of monthly meetings in North America is available at quakermeetings.com.

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.

Queries for Worship and Discussion

Have you ever been part of a faith community that came to an end? What was that experience like?

How familiar are you with the process for laying meetings down in your own yearly meeting or group?

How does the idea of hospice feel similar, or not similar, to the way we might approach the ending of a meeting? Is this a metaphor that feels helpful to you?

The Life Cycle

Emily Provance

We humans start tiny, but precious and unique, helpless but set apart for some particular purpose. A spark of life. As we grow, we learn from our elders about how to be and how not to be. We inherit things from those who came before us. Some of the teachings, culture, procedures, and assumptions that we inherit are useful and good. And some of it needs to be laid aside.

We experiment. We discover ourselves, our gifts and strengths, our own ways of being in the world. We may learn what we, particularly, are called to do or be. We live. We go through periods of thriving and struggling, of resting and acting, of hope and of grief. We engage with communities, which means giving and receiving, both material and immaterial things. As we age, we often pass along wisdom, and we know that some of this will ultimately be rejected, because—of course—we understand continuing revelation.

Eventually, we expect to die. We know, with certainty, that all of us will pass from earthly life, and we're surprised if we live a hundred years. Of course, we do leave legacies behind. A collection of acts of kindness. Scientific discoveries. Works of art. Children and grandchildren. Finances and property. Ideas. Examples of faithfulness.

All living things die.

A Quaker meeting is a living thing. Corporate worship teaches me so. Spirit animates a meeting with a Life force that is more than the essences of the people within it. I've been with meetings and churches around the world, and I know that—like people—they are precious and unique, set apart for some particular purpose. They're born with a spark of life, and they grow, and they die. They inherit teachings, culture, procedures, and assumptions from meetings that came before them. They keep some of these; they reject some of these. They go through periods of thriving and struggling, of resting and acting, of hope and of grief. They engage with wider communities, giving and receiving both material and immaterial things. And when they die, they leave legacies.

This isn't meant to be depressing. I kind of think it's a wonderful thing. We need not imagine our meetings are immortal. When they die, that's not a failure. It's the way of things.

In the past few months, I've spoken to several experts in the field of congregational closures. These are people whose life's work, for decades, has been with congregations of other denominations that are coming near to the end of their time. They tell me that the average life of a congregation is not much longer than the life of a human. If your meeting is more than a hundred years old, it has already exceeded its life expectancy.

That doesn't mean it's ready to end right now. By mathematical definition, half of all meetings last longer than the average length of meeting life. But for me, at least, just thinking of my meeting as

having a life cycle shifts my point of view. Who and why are we now, in this particular time? What is my meeting's unique calling and contribution? What will be our legacy?

There's a quote from Tuck Everlasting, which is a book about a family that's literally immortal. After centuries of life, Angus Tuck, the father, says this:

Dying's part of the wheel, right there next to being born. You can't pick out the pieces you like and leave the rest. Being part of the whole thing, that's the blessing. But it's passing us by, us Tucks. Living's heavy work, but off to one side, the way we are, it's useless, too. It don't make sense. If I knowed how to climb back on the wheel, I'd do it in a minute. You can't have living without dying. So you can't call it living, what we got. We just are, we just be, like rocks beside the road.

With a small group of Friends, I've been having conversations lately, exploring the life cycle of meetings and particularly the end of life. How do meetings, when they're ready, come to their best endings? How do we think about legacy?

Or, as Angus Tuck might phrase it, how is being "part of the whole thing" a blessing?

Queries for Worship and Discussion

What is my meeting's unique calling and contribution?

Where might my meeting be in its life cycle? Why do I think so?

Acceleration

Emily Provance

As I write these words in early 2022, I'm deeply aware of two years of pandemic conditions (the definition of "pandemic conditions" varying widely depending upon one's location) and societal instability of numerous kinds. Loneliness, anxiety, depression, and feelings of exhaustion and overwhelm are widely present. Most people are struggling at least somewhat, including those of us who are telling ourselves, "Oh, it's not too bad for me." And some of us are suffering to an extreme degree.

Our brains, bodies, and spirits were not designed for long-term conditions such as these. There are very real limits on our human capacity. For this reason, many Quaker meetings and churches are encountering difficulty. For the most part, what the last two years have done is revealed and accelerated pre-existing trends. Aging meetings have aged faster. Shrinking meetings have shrunk faster. Meetings that had a hard time including families have, in many cases, lost track of those families. Groups with underlying conflict may have experienced that conflict surfacing in destructive ways.

There are certainly exceptions. There are meetings that are now doing as well as they were in early 2020. There are even meetings that have grown and that are thriving. But in other cases, meetings and churches that were a decade or two away from the end of their life cycles are suddenly closer than they expected to be.

If you're wondering whether that's true for your meeting or a meeting that you know, then you are not alone. But for meetings that have shifted—theoretically temporarily—to a hybrid or virtual model, it might be hard to assess where you really are in your life cycle. Are you in a long-term growth pattern or a short-term burst of energy? Are you experiencing short-term struggles or needing to start talking about the end of your meeting?

It is likely worth setting aside some time to share with one another in your Quaker community.

Queries for Worship and Discussion

Are you anticipating a return to "normal" for our meeting at some point? When you imagine "normal," what is most important to you about what that looks like and feels like?

What do you think your meeting will be like in five years?

What would you say is your meeting's current status: a long-term growth pattern, a short-term burst of energy, short-term struggles, or nearing the end of its life cycle? Or some combination of those? Or none of the above?

Shame and Stigma

Emily Provance

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. Thinking 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 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.

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?

Queries for Worship and Discussion

Individuals often prepare a will or advanced directive. Is it time for your meeting to create an advanced directive in case it should cease?

What legacy do you want your meeting to have?

What practical concerns will the meeting have concerning buildings, burial grounds and money?

Thriving and Declining

Emily Provance

By their very nature, life cycles are kind of slow, and it can be difficult to tell when a meeting is declining. Friends who have been part of a meeting community for many decades might be aware of an extreme change when comparing modern day to thirty years ago, but at what point does a very gradual event become immediately important to deal with? And Friends who are relatively new to a meeting community generally have nothing to compare it to.

Over the years, I've heard many Friends say, "Well, there's always been a cyclical nature to our meeting life. There are times when the meeting is healthier and more active, and times when it is less so. We always rebound." I suspect, though, that in some cases, these cyclical patterns are more like a roller coaster, in which every summit is lower than the summit that goes before. (On a roller coaster, they have to be. Otherwise the cars have insufficient momentum to climb the next hill.)

So what are some of the signs of thriving and declining? Here's a partial list, culled from a number of writings and resources, most of which I'll link to below. As you read, see if you can put yourself in a place of curiosity. What might your reflections be telling you about where your meeting is in its natural life cycle?

Sign of thriving? We often talk about the future of our meeting—what we might try doing next month, next year, or five years down the road. **Or sign of declining?** We spend more than half our time talking about the history of Quakerism or about memories of our meeting in the past.

Sign of declining? It seems hard to get the basic functions of the meeting done. Some of us feel overburdened and tired. **Or sign of thriving?** Most of us serve the meeting community in ways that we enjoy and that match our gifts and skills.

Sign of thriving? The number of people in worship each Sunday has grown or stayed about the same in the past ten years. **Or sign of declining?** The number of people in worship each Sunday is much smaller than the number of people in worship ten years ago.

Sign of declining? Our building is often unoccupied, and we worry about how we will continue to pay for its upkeep. **Or sign of thriving?** We consistently use our building to serve the purposes of our meeting and to help our neighborhood community.

Sign of thriving? A good portion of the meeting's time, money, and energy goes into projects that support the neighborhood community in some way. We often hold activities outside or participate in activities that other neighborhood organizations are sponsoring. **Or sign of declining?** Most of the meeting's time, money, and energy goes into projects that support the members' and meeting's own needs or wants.

Sign of declining? We feel a sense of separation from our quarterly meeting and/or yearly meeting. Either we don't know much about them, or we simply don't participate in them, or

possibly they are non-functional. **Or sign of thriving?** We feel like we are really part of our quarterly meeting and/or yearly meeting.

Sign of thriving? When we talk about our budget, we talk about what God wants us to do. **Or sign of declining?** When we talk about our budget, we talk about how we'll make ends meet.

Sign of declining? Handling normal meeting business seems hard. **Or sign of thriving?** We handle normal meeting business. As needed, we can accept new members, consider proposals coming from other groups of Friends, respond to communications from seekers and visitors, host memorial meetings, take marriages under our care, and set up clearness committees. And we can do this in a timely manner.

Sign of thriving? Within our meeting, we have participants of all ages who we see regularly: older adults, middle-aged adults, younger adults, teens, children, and toddlers/babies. **Or sign of declining?** We are all or nearly all older adults.

Sign of declining? The demographics of our meeting are very unlike the demographics of our immediate neighborhood. **Or sign of thriving?** The demographics of our meeting (class, race, primary language, ethnicity, etc.) are roughly similar to the demographics of our immediate neighborhood.

Sign of thriving? When conflicts happen within the meeting, we deal with them openly. We are comfortable saying no to people and setting boundaries. **Or sign of declining?** When conflicts happen within the meeting, we find it distressing and try to avoid or cover up the disagreements.

Top sign of declining: When, as a meeting, we realize we aren't doing something very well, our normal reaction is to feel powerless about changing it.

Top sign of thriving: When, as a meeting, we realize we aren't doing something very well, our normal reaction is to experiment with new and different ways of going about it.

And this is key. A meeting can have any number of the so-called signs of declining and still be a thriving, vital meeting, if the meeting is willing and able to engage in trying new things. If the meeting as a whole (not just a few individuals) is not willing and able to engage in trying new things, then it might be time to consider: are we nearing the end of our meetings' life cycle? What does that mean to us?

Queries for Worship and Discussion

What stands out to you as you read through the signs of thriving and declining?

What actions could be taken now to improve the vitality of your meeting? Without blame, just noticing: is there energy to do this work?

All or Nothing?

Emily Provance

A meeting in a natural state of decline may not be ready to close entirely. Friends know, from many years of experience, that very few choices in life are truly binary. We may not have to say, “Are we ready to lay the meeting down entirely?” It may instead be a matter of, “What would be the most faithful reflection of what God is calling us to at this time?”

Perhaps a meeting is finding it hard to handle normal business. Friends are grateful for worship together and find that worship inspired and deep. But given the life circumstances and the energy level of Friends, the idea of coordinating events, accepting new members, running a First Day School, and so forth seems impossible. This meeting might be most faithful by transitioning to a worship group. It can release its responsibilities for business and membership, plus the ownership of property, into the hands of a monthly meeting that is thriving.

Perhaps a meeting is struggling to fill nominating slots, and Friends are feeling overburdened and tired. This meeting might be ready to reassess its committee structure. Can Friends move to a less formal manner of getting things done? Lay down some committees and reorganize the truly necessary work of the meeting in a way that meets the skills and gifts of individual Friends?

Perhaps a meeting is composed entirely of older adults, and while the Friends care for one another deeply, they are unsure how they will continue to care for their property and meet their budget five years from now. This meeting might be ready to lay itself down formally, while Friends still have energy to think about legacy—but that doesn’t mean the spiritual relationships have to come to an end. These Friends could continue to meet regularly for social connection and worship in one another’s homes as long as they wanted to.

Perhaps a meeting’s demographics don’t resemble the demographics of the immediate neighborhood, and Friends in the meeting travel long distances to access the meetinghouse. This meeting might be ready to sell or donate its building to an organization that is active and highly relevant in the neighborhood. The meeting itself could continue as a virtual meeting, simply not owning or renting property.

Perhaps a meeting is shrinking in numbers, and attendance at meeting for worship is less than half of what it was ten years ago. This meeting might combine with another nearby meeting. If the property of one meeting or the other is sold, that income could be used to support the ministries of the combined group for many years.

Sometimes, even when we are brave enough to ask the question “can our meeting keep going?” it does not occur to us that we, in fact, have many potential ways forward. The trick is to trust ourselves and God as we walk along pathways we had not expected.

Queries for Worship and Discussion

Is our meeting able to fulfill its primary responsibilities as a Friends Meeting?

What would be the most faithful reflection of what God is calling us to be at this time?

The Meeting Member

Emily Provance

Among yearly meetings that have written procedures for laying down a meeting—many do not—almost all assume that the initiative for laying down a meeting will come from within the meeting itself. *This is difficult to do under any circumstances and impossible to do if meeting members wait to act until they no longer have any energy.*

The act of closing a meeting includes a number of steps, each of which requires spiritual, physical, and emotional energy. They may or may not happen in precisely this order:

- 1) Noticing and acknowledgement: does our meeting seem to be in an ongoing state of decline? How do we know? How do we feel about that?
- 2) Discernment: how are we led to be together as a meeting at this time? Are we led to continue precisely as we are for a bit longer? Or are we led to make changes to our structure to reflect our current state more accurately, such as changing to an online-only meeting or shifting to be a worship group or combining with another meeting? Or are we led to, and able to, invest large amounts of energy in growth and change? Or are we led to begin the process of laying our meeting down faithfully?
- 3) Asking for help: if we are laying ourselves down, or if we are seriously considering laying ourselves down, then it is time to contact our quarterly or yearly meeting. We will also need to contact a lawyer who understands nonprofit law in our state or country.
- 4) Reflection: what ministries or concerns have always been important to us as a meeting? What would we hope to make space for as we lay down the meeting?
- 5) Pastoral care: let's reach out to our members and to others who might have strong feelings about this meeting reaching the end of its life cycle. We can help each Friend decide where and how they will worship and maintain social relationships after this meeting has closed.
- 6) Practical concerns: what will happen to all of the physical assets in our building? What will happen to our building and grounds themselves? What legal forms need to be filed? What will be done with the financial resources of our meeting? This is the point at which you will most need the help of a lawyer. It's also the time when you need to understand your meeting's legacy. Affirming the ministries or concerns that have always been important to you as a meeting will help you know how best to use your practical assets as the meeting itself closes.
- 7) History: where is the best place to send our historical records? Do we want to record our memories or collect photographs for ourselves?
- 8) Celebration: let's gather for worship and a social time, bringing together everyone who loves this meeting. We can share our memories and gratitude for its existence.

I don't offer the list above for the purpose of overwhelming anyone. These things do not have to be done all at once; they can happen over time. The point is to emphasize that, if the meeting waits too long to work through these steps, the few meeting members that remain may find themselves powerless to tend to a faithful ending in the manner they would wish.

The first step for a meeting member might be informal conversations with other members: how do you think we're doing? What do you think our meetings' future might look like? Later, there might be a more formal conversation in a worshipful setting.

One final note. It's often the case that one or two Friends will feel strongly that a declining meeting can or should be revitalized and grow again. You might encounter such Friends. You might *be* such a Friend. As the group discerns, try to pay attention to the true sense of the meeting. Rather than pinning hopes on one or two individuals, notice: what is the energy level of the meeting as a whole? *Are* you collectively led to change and grow? If not, consider speaking bravely and honestly about the truth of where you really are.

Queries for Worship and Discussion

What rises for you as you look at the eight steps in this essay?

Is your meeting led and able to invest large amounts of energy in growth and change?

Is your meeting led to begin the process of laying the meeting down faithfully?

The Loving Outsider

Emily Provance

Many denominations have full-time institutional ministers who work to support faith communities working through congregational closure. As far as I can tell, Friends do not. Our long-standing testimony against “hireling ministry” started as a recognition that academic degrees or denominational appointments do not qualify a person for ministry; instead, the immediate call of the Holy Spirit does. But this has had some long-term cultural side effects. One is our tendency to disregard subject-area-specific expertise in our faith communities even when it would be very helpful. Another is our disinclination to provide financial support for people to live into genuine ministries. For those reasons and others, we generally don’t have end-of-meeting-life experts with many years of experience who are prepared to help wherever needed.

This means that outside assistance usually comes in the form of people whose job descriptions might not explicitly include end-of-meeting-life support. Most often, this is quarterly/area/regional meeting clerks. Sometimes, it might be yearly meeting clerks or staff members. It could be trustees of the wider organization. In theory, it could also be umbrella organization staff or committee members, though support for end-of-meeting-life does not seem to be a specifically articulated part of the mission of any national or international Quaker organization of which I am aware.

In theory, theologically speaking, Friends might say that the responsibility to minister to a meeting that’s closing belongs to whomever God calls to do it. This resonates with me. The trouble is, because Friends have a rightful concern about corporate discernment of significant calls to ministry, we tend to set up structures that eventually function as permission-based systems. A person who is not in any particular institutional position, either volunteer or staff, might not feel as though they have *permission* from the wider body of Friends to intercede. It gets tricky.

The whole thing is further complicated by issues of trust. Every long-term congregational closure institutional minister with whom I’ve spoken so far (all of which have either been United Church of Christ or Church of Christ—Disciples) has brought this up. They have all encountered situations where a local congregation has had bad experiences, or not enough experiences, with members of their denomination outside the local community. When this happens, they often do not make fine distinctions in their emotional reactions. They do not say, “Bernadette from Organization Y treated us badly, and therefore we do not trust Bernadette or Organization Y.” They say, “Bernadette from Organization Y treated us badly, and therefore we do not trust outsiders.” This may or may not be a conscious thought process, but either way, the result is the same. It will be very difficult for any person outside the local community to provide meaningful support with an end-of-meeting-life process.

So—what is the loving outsider to do? The Friend with genuine, Spirit-led call to help a community that is struggling?

First: recognize who you are in terms of your relationship with the meeting.

Are you holding an institutional position? Is it possible that accepting the institutional position has given you the responsibility of working with meetings at the end of their life cycles, whether you realized that before or not? Do the members of the meeting know you? Do you know them?

Or, if you are not holding an institutional position but you recognize a call to walk alongside a meeting that's nearing the end of its life cycle, do they know you? Do you know them? Will they perceive you as a companion or as an interloper? Is there anything you can do, or need to do, to be in right relationship? For example, do you need to enter a discernment process and obtain a minute of travel? Or, less formally, do you need to have a conversation with someone who does hold an institutional position to make sure that your concern is rightly led and will be welcomed?

Second: focus on trust.

Even if the need for action might be years down the road, you can focus on trust. Trust is built differently in different communities, often because the local culture is different. On a surface level, trust can come from things like “does this person talk like us?” or “does this person eat/dress like us?” or “does this person believe like us?” Some communities need ongoing social connection to build trust. Others are more likely to build trust through shared work on a project. Still others will build trust only over time based on whether a person fulfills their commitments—which is complicated, because trust evaluation happens based on what the community perceives your commitments to be, which might not align with what you thought they were.

In all cases, trust building will be easier if a community is already inclined to trust outsiders, or already inclined to trust outsiders from some particular institution. This comes from pre-existing or historical relationships. Unfortunately, meetings that are nearing the end of their life cycle are less likely than others to have living memory of strong relationships with outsiders, simply because meetings nearing the end of their life cycle are likely to have less energy and to use that limited energy in a mostly inward direction.

A community nearing the end of its life cycle will likely accept support, and especially intercession, only from someone they already trust.

Third: meet the community where it is.

An outsider can often see things that members of a meeting cannot. It can be tempting for the outsider to start by naming what can be seen, but before you do so, it might help to take some time and listen deeply. As is the case for every type of ending and transition, laying down a meeting involves a lot of emotional work, and particularly grief. Often, people cannot move forward effectively with endings until after they've had some opportunities to engage with their grief—not resolve it entirely, but at least begin to engage.

Community members may need to worship, may need to feel angry, may need to feel sad, may need to try wild last-ditch efforts to “save” the community, may need to do any number of things

before they are ready and able to make identifiable forward motion toward considering end-of-meeting-life. If a meeting is not ready for the end-of-meeting-life conversation, the loving outsider might be able to gently encourage the group in that direction, but forcing the issue is almost guaranteed to backfire.

Besides—to attempt to create, or enforce, a timeline and direction for a meeting would also not be in keeping with Friends' understanding of discernment. Like any other piece of work, the community needs to step toward end-of-meeting-life work at the point when it is able to reach a sense of the meeting to do so.

Queries for Worship and Discussion

In your region, who are the loving outsiders that will be able to provide spiritual and practical guidance to a declining meeting?

How does the idea of the loving outsider feel to you?

Might you, or someone in your meeting, be a loving outsider for a declining meeting near you?

Practical Steps

Emily Provance

Suppose your Quaker meeting is clear to lay itself down. What next? What are the practical decisions and logistical steps that must be made, and who is responsible for them?

First, as I've heard over and over in talking with experts, you will need a lawyer. You might need to hire this lawyer yourselves, or there might be a lawyer prepared to volunteer on behalf of your quarterly or yearly meeting. But it will help a lot to have one in place early in the closure.

If your meeting is legally established as its own non-profit, there will be multiple steps to take in terms of filing paperwork, and there will be specific and possibly tricky regulations about to where and in what way your finances and property can be transferred. If your meeting is not its own non-profit organization, then its assets are probably owned by a larger non-profit already (such as a quarterly or yearly meeting), which makes things considerably easier.

In some places, if you are established as a non-profit, then you already have something written down somewhere about what happens to your assets if the meeting closes. This is because many places require a plan to be established and filed at the time that the non-profit opens. If your meeting is old enough that its establishment predates living memory, you might be surprised by the plan that is legally filed. In any case, you will need to know what that plan is and consult with a legal expert to find out what you must do next.

If you have some wiggle room about where your major assets go, it's time to consider your meeting's legacy. What have historically been the major ministries and concerns of your meeting? How can your assets be used in a way that supports and perpetuates those ministries and concerns? For example, a meeting with a long history of running a food bank might set up an endowment for a long-standing local food security organization. A meeting with ties to a mission in another country might donate its assets to the organization that runs that mission. A meeting with ecumenical ministries might be able to donate its building (or sell it for a low price) to a local church that is growing rapidly.

Most meetings also own property that is relatively small, such as office supplies, books, artwork, and furniture. Again, carefully check your local laws. A meeting probably cannot, legally, simply say to its members, "Take whatever small things you'd like to have to remember the meeting." However, it might be possible to have a sale that is open to the public, with prices deliberately set at an affordable level, so that members of the meeting (and others) are able to purchase some small things.

Consider your meeting's historical archives. Even if you don't have them compiled in a formal, systematic fashion, you probably do have minutes and membership records and other documents detailing marriages, births, adoptions, deaths, and so forth. These may be of interest to future

historians and genealogists. Your yearly meeting is probably the best place to start in asking where and how to store your archives. If you don't have a yearly meeting, contact any large Quaker organization. You can probably get ideas from their archival practices.

In addition to whatever legal procedures are in place, there will be a Quaker procedure, and this might come before, after, or during the legal process. The first place to look for information about meeting closures from this perspective is your yearly meeting's Faith and Practice, if you have one. Some yearly meetings also have an entirely separate book of business procedures. If there is a process in place, try to follow it.

If your yearly meeting does not have a Faith and Practice, or if there is no mention of a process for laying down a meeting, you might have to make it up. Consider how to make sure the rest of the yearly meeting is aware of what's happening. At a minimum, can you send a minute from your business meeting to your quarterly or yearly meeting? Might this include an invitation for other Friends to be holding your meeting in prayer as you go through the closing procedure?

Also, especially in the last ten years or so, there is an increasing number of independent meetings—that is, meetings and churches not affiliated with any larger organization. This does not mean that the wider body of Friends will not care if your church or meeting is closing. If it feels right, consider sending a minute (or even a less formal letter) about the closure to an umbrella organization, such as Friends World Committee for Consultation, and/or to other churches and meetings in your local area, even if you are not affiliated with them in any way. If it feels appropriate, invite them to worship with you or hold you in the Light.

Finally, consider how the closure of your meeting might affect your immediate neighbors. Make sure that people who live or work in your immediate area are aware that you will be closing. I'll have more to say about this in my next (and final) post on this subject, which will focus on pastoral care.

Queries for Worship and Discussion

If your meeting is ready to be laid down, what will be your first steps? Where will you need assistance?

What does your meeting want its legacy to be?

Pastoral Care

Emily Provance

Rufus Jones called local worship communities “the ganglia and arterial fountains of our spiritual life.” Our meetings and churches are the primary places, the most basic groups, in which we gather to listen to God. They are the communities in which we take on tasks too big for one person, designed to provide mutual spiritual and temporal care. Our meetings are where we are married, where our children are accepted into membership, where we expect our memorials to be held. And they are the place we go, habitually, for weekly worship and periodic potlucks, through all of the ordinary and extraordinary moments of living.

When a meeting is closing, its members will naturally have questions. They’ll have need of pastoral care. This can be provided by other members of the meeting, by loving outsiders, or—most likely—by some combination thereof.

Is there space for our grief? To lose a meeting is to lose something precious, even if laying the meeting down is absolutely the right thing to do. Friends are likely to need formal and informal opportunities to share their grief. This can happen in special meetings for worship, in worship sharing, in prayer gatherings, in small group conversations, and more. Because the process of closing a meeting is likely to take quite some time, there will need to be multiple opportunities for grief. Friends should also anticipate grief happening on its own timetable. It will come out at inconvenient moments and will need to be recognized and affirmed. Some Friends might want to write a memorial minute for the meeting itself, just as we do for individuals. There could even be a memorial meeting for worship.

Is there opportunity for us to celebrate? Not everything about laying down a meeting is sad! If the meeting has former members who have moved away, or if there are children and grandchildren of deceased members, the meeting might designate a particular day to gather (in person or online) for a celebration of the meeting and of each other. In such a celebration, Friends can share favorite memories of the meeting and old photographs. They might sing songs or participate in activities that have traditionally been part of the meeting’s culture. Some meetings will want to invite the people in their neighborhood to such a celebration; neighbors might also have joyful memories to share. Celebrations might also include announcements about what will happen next with the meeting’s assets. For example, if the meeting is going to make a significant donation to a local nonprofit, the meeting might invite a representative of that nonprofit to the celebration.

Where will we worship? Some meetings, when they close, will have stopped being a regular worship community already. But in other cases, Friends are still attending worship regularly. While individuals can certainly make their own arrangements for new worship communities, it might help for the group to have some conversations about this. Is there a meeting nearby where we can

worship? If not, is there a meeting that we can join online? Or might we gather for worship occasionally in someone's living room? The institutional end of a meeting does not prevent anyone from inviting personal friends to gather around a kitchen table.

How will we stay connected to our beloved Friends? Perhaps the meeting's members will be going separate ways for worship in the future. This does not necessarily mean that they can't continue to have social relationships. Monthly in-person gatherings, simple email lists, and occasional video calls all allow for ongoing social connection. Friends can continue to share recipes, help each other with yard work, and celebrate the birth of new grandchildren after the end of the meeting, but it helps to speak openly about whether this is desired. Maintaining social connections will take some deliberate effort, and it's good to know for sure that it's wanted.

Will our meeting be forgotten? A meeting needn't be forgotten. Minutes, documents, and photographs can be gathered and archived. Also, Friends can record their memories of the meetings on paper, in sound files, or on video. If the intention is to store these personal memories in archives, they'll need to be put together in particular ways, but it might be the case that personal memories are mostly preserved for meeting members themselves to watch, plus their children and grandchildren. Finally, remember: even if the name and history of the meeting itself is forgotten, its effects will continue to ripple through the world for who-knows-how-long, in ways that no human could ever trace.

Queries for Worship and Discussion

Consider each of the five questions in this essay as they relate to your meeting. Is there space for grief? Is there opportunity to celebrate?

Where will we worship? How will we stay connected to our beloved Friends? Will our meeting be forgotten?

When a person dies, we write a memorial minute to celebrate the spiritual and practical gifts of the individual. What elements would you include in a memorial minute for your meeting?

How can you celebrate the life and witness of your meeting? Is there a way its witness can continue in your community?

Case Studies

It can be helpful to study how other meetings have thought about transitions and the ends of their life cycles. What did other meetings do that we'd like to try, too? Where might we see mistakes that we could learn from?

Even meetings that aren't quite ready to lay themselves down can do significant work in terms of preparing for an end. Just as one plans for a weather disaster when there is no threat on the horizon, it behooves a meeting to think about its legacy and how to fulfill that while it is still healthy.

The four case studies below are each written and presented differently. No attempt has been made to make them parallel in structure, as there is no single right way to discern and document transitions in the life cycle. However, each case study has a brief introduction with suggestions about how it might be read and considered. These are only suggestions, and Friends are encouraged to use to case studies in whatever ways are most helpful.

The article below was written in 2022 for New York Yearly Meeting's newsletter, called Spark. It is a retroactive reflection on Stamford-Greenwich Friends Meeting, having been drafted some years after it was laid down.

What do you notice about the way the story is told as a whole? If you were going to write a history of your own meeting, how might your approach be similar to or different from the text below? What do you notice about the steps taken at Stamford-Greenwich toward the end of the meeting's life cycle?

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

Esmé Ingledew & Janet Hough

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 explosions

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 though 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-Greenwich 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 meetings being laid down, ownership of the meetings' 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.

As you read the minutes below, what do you notice about the life cycle of Pond Town Monthly Meeting? What legacy do you see Pond Town leaving behind? How were Friends cared for during the laying-down process? Does anything feel missing from this record?

The Life Cycle of Pond Town Monthly Meeting

Janet Hough, clerk of Vassalboro Quarterly Meeting

Friends seeking unprogrammed worship in the manner of Friends began meeting in the Winthrop area as Pond Town Worship Group, under the care of Winthrop Center Friends Church. Pond Town Monthly Meeting was set off from Winthrop Center in 1983. Later, a worship group began meeting in Farmington, under the care of Pond Town MM, which was eventually set off as Farmington Monthly Meeting, in 1991.

As early as 2006, facing dwindling attendance, Pond Town Friends considered the possibility of laying down the monthly meeting, with the intention of becoming a worship group again. In the end, they did not reach clarity to do so. The death of Tom Sturtevant in early 2012 seems to have been a tipping point. In 2014, Ann Dodd-Collins, a member of VQM Ministry and Counsel who had previously worshiped with Pond Town Friends, had conversations with Karen Burke, the last clerk of the meeting. Karen shared that she would welcome the help of VQM in laying the meeting down. Pond Town had not been meeting for several years. They owned no property, and had no investments. The money in the meeting account had been given to the Winthrop Food Bank and to Tom Sturtevant's memorial, and the account had been closed.

With the recommendation of VQM Ministry and Counsel, in 2015 VQM formally minuted that it would be laying down Pond Town Meeting. VQM-M&C agreed to shepherd the process – to offer support to the members in their sadness about the laying down of the Meeting and in discerning other membership opportunities.

By May 2017, Ann Dodd-Collins, Mark Rains, and Holly Weidner had contacted the 9 individuals NEYM still had listed as members of Pond Town, as well as the two past-attenders, to inform them of the intention to lay the meeting down. One person listed as a member of Pond Town was actually a member of Winthrop Center Friends. Of the remaining 8, three asked for transfers and

been welcomed into membership in Farmington Monthly Meeting; one asked for transfer and has been welcomed into membership in Vassalboro Monthly Meeting; and five asked to have their membership in the Society of Friends discontinued when Pond Town is laid down.

We believe it is time to lay down Pond Town Meeting with deep gratitude to the Friends who made Pond Town a loving and vibrant place of worship, fellowship and witness over the lifetime of the Meeting.

Minutes and other records for Pond Town Meeting

Mark Rains agreed to contact Karen Burke, and collect any Minutes and other records for Pond Town that she had, for eventual submission to the Archives. Karen said that she thought some material from/about Pond Town MM was or had been in Tom Sturtevant's barn. Mark learned that Tom Sturtevant's wife is also now deceased, so he does not expect there is more to pursue on finding them.

Member/Attender	display_name_last.first	display_alert_deceased
Member	Audsley (Beattie), Jeanne	discontinue
Member	Burke, Karen	Farmington
Member	Harville (Clappison), Libby	discontinue
Member	Harville, Alan	discontinue
Non-resident Member	Perkins, Ken	discontinue
Non-resident Member	Perkins, Marie	Stayed Winthrop Center
Member	Pukkila, Marilyn R.	Vassalboro
Member	Richardson, Gladys	Farmington
Member	Richardson, Burt	Farmington
Attender	Bransky, Mick	informed
Attender	Harker, John R.	informed
past members		
past member	Sturtevant, Tom	deceased
past member	Norton, Al	Portland
past member	Shaw, Beverly	Farmington
past member	Weidner, Holly	Vassalboro
past member	Warren, Barbara	Vassalboro
past attenders		
Attender	Perry, Deb	informed
Attender	Dodd-Collins, Ann	Winthrop - Portland

As you read, you'll see that a number of factors contributed to the decline of Londonderry Friends Church and the difficulty of laying it down when the time came. There are a number of ways in which things might have been handled differently at various stages. What patterns do you see in the story that you might hope to avoid replicating? What is the role of relationship between Quaker meetings in maintaining the health of meetings? Is there anything in the story that you would celebrate? If you had known about Londonderry Friends Church during its last years—say, in the year 2019—what would you have prayed for?

Laying Down Londonderry Friends Church

J. P. Lund, clerk of Wilmington Yearly Meeting from 2018 to 2021

Londonderry Friends Church was officially laid down at the 2021 annual sessions of Wilmington Yearly Meeting.

The meeting had been moribund for a long time. Geographically, they were isolated from the rest of the yearly meeting, at the eastern edge, about an hour's drive from Wilmington. This was far enough that it was easy for yearly meeting to allow them to drift away. They were a part of Fairfield Quarter.

That quarter included many meetings like Londonderry, Quaker by historical association, but not committed to the distinctively Quaker witness. The quarter had ceased meeting regularly many years ago, and by the time I became clerk in 2018, it was not functioning.

Since membership of the monthly meeting was through the quarterly meeting, this meant that normal procedures for such things as laying down a meeting were not functioning. This became an issue when several meetings decided to disaffiliate from the yearly meeting in 2018.

The yearly meeting authorized the yearly meeting's Ministry and Counsel to take on these responsibilities for Fairfield Quarter. The other two quarterly meetings in WYM, Friendsville (in Tennessee) and Miami Center (in southwest Ohio) were active, and meetings in these quarters that wished to disaffiliate from the yearly meeting did so first with the quarterly meeting. I believe that Londonderry, had it been active, would have been among those that disaffiliated from the yearly meeting.

Sometime around 2014, Lois Hackney and Sharon Trivet, who are members of different meetings in the Wilmington area, visited Londonderry Friends Church on behalf of the yearly meeting. They contacted Londonderry Friends in advance of their visit. Lois and Sharon were of course willing to offer any assistance from the yearly meeting that might be requested, but their primary interest was simply to visit and worship together with these Friends.

This gesture of fellowship was apparently received by Londonderry Friends with some alarm. They were worried that the yearly meeting was going to shut them down. They gathered as many members together as they could, some of whom had not attended for quite a while due to health and other reasons, to make sure that the worship was well enough attended to make a good showing. At that time, Londonderry was not meeting for worship every week. Sometimes, they would only meet for Sunday School.

By 2018, the only regular event held at the church was an annual service on Memorial Day. The town would have a parade, which ended at the large cemetery next to the church, part of which is Quaker. (Thomas Beal, the first Quaker missionary to the “Indians” in this area, was buried in this cemetery in 1801.) <https://www.chillicothegazette.com/story/news/2021/04/05/londonderry-cemetery-undergomuch-needed-update/7060381002/>

<https://lawrencecountyohio.com/stories/quakers-in-southern-ohio/>

After the parade, they held a worship service in the church. As clerk, I planned to attend the Memorial Day event in 2019. Not wanting to go all that way without being sure that there actually was something happening there, I tried to contact someone in Londonderry. I had some difficulty in finding a contact. Eventually, I reached Jane Brown, daughter of daughter of Evelyn Cleary, the last remaining active member.

The work of getting the building ready for the event apparently fell on Jane Brown. She might have had a little help, but it was her responsibility to see that things got done.

I got to the church well before things really started. There were small bouquets of flowers laid out in rows beside the building. The parade happened. People then milled around, many of the walking through the cemetery, placing flowers on some of the graves.

Only a few people joined the worship service. It was a simple programmed meeting, organized by a pastor who evidently knew nothing of Quakers. His sermon featured a description of Jesus as the ideal soldier. I kept my mouth shut.

The service featured a reading of the names of all the veterans buried in the cemetery, or who had fought and died in one of the various wars. The meetinghouse had a large framed document displayed on a side wall in the worship space listing all of the members of Londonderry Friends Church who had fought for their country.

Afterwards, I talked a bit with Jane Brown. She showed me the building. I expressed my fear that this building would end up in the hands of the yearly meeting. I made it clear that we had no use for it.

Later that year, Jane informed me that a small worship group, the Pentecostal Praise and Worship Center, was renting the space. She had also contacted an attorney. The following year, she and the attorney informed us that some people had entered into a contract to purchase the property on behalf of the worship group. That contract was completed in 2021.

There was a complication. After Evelyn Cleary died, there were no living trustees of Londonderry Friends Church, and thus no-one to sign the deed. The solution was for us to complete the process of laying the meeting down, after which the Trustees of Wilmington Yearly Meeting became the successor with authority to sign the deed. I thought this had been completed, but I learned in November that signatures were still needed. The proceeds of the sale of the building were donated to the township for the maintenance of the cemetery.

After the yearly meeting sessions approved the minute finally laying down Londonderry Friends Church, Friends approved the following minute:

Wilmington Yearly Meeting expresses its sincere appreciation to Jane Brown for her stewardship of the resources of Londonderry Friends Church. Over the last few years, she did whatever needed to be done, whether it was cleaning the church in preparation for the annual community worship service on Memorial Day, to supervising needed upkeep. She oversaw the sale of the building, which will continue to be a center of worship. She is seeing to it that the proceeds of the sale will be used as the members wished, to assure the cemetery will be properly cared for in the years to come.

Laying down an institution that meant so much to her family had to be emotionally fraught. Given the reality that Londonderry Friends Church was not going to continue as a Quaker church, we could not have wished for a better outcome. Both the community of Londonderry and Wilmington Yearly Meeting have been blessed by her diligence. We are grateful for her service.

The following is a letter that was sent to Friends everywhere. West Newton Friends (Western Yearly Meeting) had reached a transitional stage of its life as a meeting for worship. There was energy and life for worship and community together, but that did not include the maintenance of their building. So the meeting discerned the need for a change.

As you read the following, what do you notice about the letter? What new challenges might West Newton face in its new form? Although the future is uncharted and uncertain, West Newton Friends trust that they have a future. What future do you see for your meeting?

West Newton Friends

For sixty years, the West Newton Friends Meetinghouse at 6800 S. Mooresville Road has been our spiritual home for worship, fellowship, and so much more. However, we have found that, at this stage of our life together, care of the building and grounds has become an encumbrance and it is time to pass it on to another congregation. We are moving to a place that better suits our current needs and allows us to continue worshipping together. This will make it possible for us to maintain our healthy support for various outreach activities.

We want to honor the building that has been our home, so we are hosting a Celebration Sunday on October 23, 2022. We will begin worship at 9:00 a.m. with displays in the foyer and hymn singing in the meetingroom. Then at 9:30, we will have programmed worship that includes several planned readings and reflections by West Newton Friends and a message by Sylvia Graves Beane. That will be followed by open worship/sharing.

We're inviting Friends from area meetings, as well as our wider association with Friends in Western Yearly Meeting and Friends United Meeting, to join us on October 23rd. We also invite you to join us after worship in Mills Hall as we enjoy coffee, tea and light snacks, visiting, and reminiscing. You are invited to attend in person or via Zoom.

Blessings,

West Newton Friends

P.S. It is with joy that we welcome a new member, who joins us weekly via Zoom. Beginning on October 30, we will be holding in-person Meeting for Worship at the Goodwin Center, at 3935 W. Mooresville Rd, Indianapolis. The Goodwin Center is one of the ministries we have long supported and we are looking forward to a deepening relationship with them and their outreach services.

Queries for Meetings in Transition

Anne Pomeroy

Originally published in New York Yearly Meeting's Spark, September 2022.

Taking Stock of the Life of the Meeting

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?

What spiritual gifts has the meeting carried? Have any been laid down?

Who is in the meeting community now? Who are we now?

What would you tell a beloved Friend about the meeting? What would you share of its history?

What do you hold dear about the meeting? How can you acknowledge this gift and the way you will carry it forward?

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

How will the members and attenders of the meeting be accompanied in their grieving and letting go? (by individuals beyond the meeting community)

What does saying goodbye to the meeting mean for individuals and the meeting as a whole?

What issues arise around grief and grieving for individuals in the community? For example, does it bring up unresolved grief?

What aspects of the meeting are you individually grateful for?

What rises for people around the ending of a spiritual community?

What impact does laying down the meeting have on an individual's identity? On their identity as a Quaker?

Where will the members/attenders turn next on their spiritual journey?

Care of the Collective

What supports are available in the wider Quaker community to accompany the meeting in the transition?

Are there gifts of the community that could be looked at as legacy —to pass on—to send forth? What might this look like?

Will laying down the meeting impact the broader Quaker community? How might this be tended?

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)

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?

Are there items in the meetinghouse that it would be meaningful to donate? Donate to where/whom?

What values are important in stewarding the transition of the meetinghouse?

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?

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?

How will the community listen spiritually throughout this process?

Care of Cemeteries

How will the care of the cemetery be transitioned?

Care of Finances

Are there individuals or committees within the yearly meeting that can help guide the financial decisions/implications of the transition of the meeting?

Are there designated funds?

How will any remaining funds be expended?

Role of the Quarterly/Regional Meeting

How will the larger Quaker community be involved in the transition?

Additional Resources

If you're curious to know what a faithful legacy approach might look like, try reading this story from the Church of Christ–Disciples. In it, the pastor of a church in California describes the joy of a congregation discerning well what might be done with its property and funding after its closure. <https://www.christianchurchfoundation.org/news/2021/7/26/artesia-christian-church?rq=artesia>

If you're interested in looking at some resources specifically designed for assessment, we suggest this guide from the United Church of Christ; in particular, look at chapter two. <https://psec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/legacyworkbook.pdf>

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting also has a lengthy health-of-meeting checklist that some Friends might actually find too detailed for an initial conversation—but it's worth a look. https://docs.google.com/document/d/16mp0C8uECIqIAPitu3XBHRqfUJ27IY21s_9mWEml2qg/edit

If you'd like to see an example of a legal guide for church closure, you might look at this document about how to close a church in the commonwealth of Massachusetts. The laws will differ from laws relevant to your own location, but it might give you an idea of the sorts of things to be looking for and questions that you might ask your lawyer. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-IHTyfKrMEHlc20un-Ml4MANow9Z04XE/edit>