

REFLECTIONS ON THE
STATE OF SOCIETY REPORTS 2003&2004

Prepared for the
CONSULTATION AND RENEWAL WORKING GROUP

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The reports make for good reading – lots of energy, enthusiasm and good and creative ideas. The overall impression is of a vital, active society, where for the most part, difficulties are dealt with lovingly and prayerfully. I have reservations about this however, discussed at the end of this reflection.

Having visited all of the Monthly Meetings except one (Montreal) within the past eight years, I find myself doing some comparison. I don't know if this is good or not so good. In some cases I see progress beyond past problems, in others a falling away. I think because of my familiarity, I am able to read between the lines – at least some of the time. I believe it is as important to discover the substance of what lies between and under as it is to read the reports – maybe more important.

It is very dangerous or risky to try and assess the health of a Monthly Meeting (MM) from reading its reports. Hence the importance of visiting. Nevertheless, I detect at least six, maybe seven MMs that are struggling. In several of these, the enormity of our geographic challenges are the cause of much difficulty.

Offsetting geography is the importance of regional gatherings. This is especially so for all of our scattered Meetings. For some geographically isolated Meetings and Worship Groups an increased use of electronic media is helpful, although not without its limitations. Paradoxically, some of the MMs most concerned for environmental costs of travel are also the most scattered. Unrelated to geography, but part of the growing phenomenon of use of electronic media, meeting websites are starting to appear. So far, no problems are mentioned here. Mostly they are seen as outreach tools. But I was somewhat surprised.

I was also struck by how few MMs have a First Day School with which they are happy. Three sound very pleased and two more are probably somewhat satisfied. That is 3-5 out of a total of 23 (not including the Worship Groups). All others are either struggling to improve or do not have one at all.

Another regular phenomenon was the frequency of study groups, day or week-end retreats, discussion groups, pot lucks and various community events, all of which foster community and spiritual nurture. I worry about the MMs and Worship Groups where this does not happen. A visit from afar is almost always noted with appreciation. Most meetings are relatively isolated

from others and the visit by Friends travelling under concern (or just simply travelling) is usually an enriching experience.

Ecumenical activities at the local level are amazingly widespread.. I was actually surprised by its extent – membership on local inter-church councils, attendance and participation in community ecumenical events, and sharing of peace work with other churches (this last is not new). One Meeting even reported attendance at services in a mosque. It makes me wonder if this might be an indicator of health because it was the apparently healthy Meetings that were most active in this regard.

Meeting houses are a source of trial and trouble, or at least much time and attention. Virtually all are used by the wider community, with the exception of one of our historic Meeting Houses.

There was much outreach activity, generated primarily by the current grants. At the same time, difficulty over the merging of long-timers with new-comers is a persistent thread in some of the reports. There is definitely food for thought here. How do we cope when outreach is successful or when we start to grow? Related to this perhaps, I also detected a persistent thread of concern about the meaning of membership. This has been a very divisive issue in other Yearly Meetings and is something we may wish to probe for among Canadian Friends.

Everyone it seems, reports the central place of Meeting for Worship. I should hope so! But I wonder how many are truly gathered. There are several who do note the lack of vocal ministry and it makes me wonder if our practice here is starting to fade and falter. One meeting mentioned less ministry which in that instance, reading between the lines, was good news.

Visiting homebound and frail elderly is mentioned frequently as a challenge. Mostly I think it is happening as well as possible. It is something our small groups can do well. A couple of Meetings mentioned efforts to keep in touch with Isolated Friends, particularly now that HMAc has passed this over.

On the whole, most meetings have strong connections, or connectors with Yearly Meeting and in some cases, wider quaker bodies. Nevertheless, there are some noteworthy exceptions. In a couple of instances, the involvement in Yearly Meeting and Half-yearly Meeting is such that it is seen as sapping energy from the MM. One meeting however, noted that they have a healthy balance in this regard.

There are also a few references to difficulties involving a reasonable number of the MMs' members and attenders in the meeting's business. Sometimes in relation to the above concern that too many are involved with Yearly or Half-yearly Meeting, but more often it is a concern that too few carry the load.

When I was through I also reviewed the statistics – at least the ones re active members and average attendance. Interesting! Only five meetings have average attendance over 20; only ten have average attendance of over half of their active members. There are good and sufficient

reasons for some “active” members to be non-attenders (age, distance), but over half the active membership? Or, it is possible the problem may lie in the definition and use of the word “active.” Either way, it merits some questioning.

I have some general questions about all of this. First of all, how good a picture are we really getting from the State of Society reports? My own experience over the years points to a fair amount of embroidery, slipping over the difficulties, making more of activities than is merited, avoiding the hard questions. Friends try to be as truthful as they can, and certainly accurate, but there is undoubtedly more to the stories.

The other major question I have comes out of my sense that the State of Society reports do not reflect the concern that was expressed about the spiritual health of our Yearly Meeting during last year’s sessions. Neither do they square with similar expressions of concern that have occurred over the entire 20 years that “revitalization and restructuring” has been on our agenda. Such concern was what led to adding the word revitalization to the process in the first place. It was what led to the name and mandate of this group. So where is this coming from? How do we get at it? Not from reading these reports.

My last question is, what is happening with the worship groups? This too was specifically mentioned during last year’s sessions. It was probably mentioned by me, but I was most definitely not the only one. We heard it in the sessions and off the floor. While there are some obvious exceptions, reading these reports leaves me with the impression that the spiritual health of many worship groups is either unknown or too embarrassing to reveal.

I want to close by posing one more question: By what criteria do we assess the health of a Monthly Meeting? Think about it.