

A YEAR OF DISCERNMENT FOR UNIVERSITY FRIENDS MEETING

I. INTRODUCTION

In December 2007, the Nominating Committee offered a proposal for a Year of Discernment for University Friends Meeting (UFM). The proposal arose from some months of discussion and redefinition, and was prompted by Nominating Committee concerns that it had become increasingly difficult to find community members willing to serve on our many committees. There was also a general sense within the Meeting community that we were overextended and had inadequate human and financial resources to do all that is needed to maintain our structure and campus, and to serve and care for our own and wider communities.

Now, two years later, the Steering Committee gratefully reports on experiences we have been blessed to share with and facilitate within the UFM community. Throughout our time together, the Steering Committee for the Year of Discernment has frequently come back to two questions to guide our process:

1. Who are we as a community?
2. What are we called to do?

This report reflects some of our answers to these questions as well as a summary of activities and accomplishments we see within UFM. We have also compiled a full record of written materials generated during the period, including reports from meetings with committees, *Gleanings* articles, related bibliography on discernment, committee initiatives such as reading and discussions of *Three Cups of Tea*, and Nominating Committee recommendations for combining or laying down committees. We particularly recommend the appended “how to do it” records from the four retreats in which many community members participated between October 2008 and October 2009.

II. WHO ARE WE?

Presently, UFM has about 180 members, of whom about half are currently active within the community. We also have a substantial number of attenders. A number of members are now connected with South Seattle Preparative Meeting, which may soon become a monthly meeting. We estimate that 150 adults are actively involved in the Meeting, by attending worship at 9:30 or 11:00 on First Day, participating in Adult Religious Education, serving on committees, and attending monthly business meeting.

Currently, only 11 or 12 children, from infants through school-age years, come to First-Day School or Preschool group on Sunday mornings. Very few Junior Friends are in evidence in UFM, although a number enjoy Quarterly and Yearly Meeting activities. The Meeting benefits from the presence of a number of Young Adult Friends. Valued members of the community also include many gray-haired folks, several families with young children, and many actively working for a living.

We employ five part-time staff in the Meeting office, as residents of the meetinghouse and Quaker House, to coordinate the QUEST program, to help nurture, clean and care for our campus and community. We host a nightly SHARE/WHEEL shelter for up to 20 homeless people, and offer meeting space for a variety of Friends and community groups. The regional offices of AFSC and a preschool are housed in our building, and six QUEST interns live in Quaker House, which also has rooms for travelers.

Year of Discernment

Nominating Committee originally discussed a wide range of ideas for some sort of special year for UFM. Suggestions included laying down “non-essential” committee work (variously defined!) for the year, or restructuring committees or committee work in various ways. Nominating Committee talked with Lorraine Watson of North Seattle Friends Church about their radical simplification of their committee structure and their decision to lay down a major ministry. Prior to the approval of the Year of Discernment proposal, Nominating Committee presented two draft proposals to monthly meeting for a “Sabbath Year,” with specific proposals for the reduction of committee work for the year and a somewhat simplified structure for remaining work. Nominating Committee soon realized that work which may seem less essential is often work which people love, and that has led into some close community for the people doing it. After receiving feedback from Monthly Meeting and talking with some individuals with concerns, a new proposal for the “Year of Discernment” emerged. The Meeting approved the Year of Discernment proposal¹ and appointed a Steering Committee for the Year of Discernment.

The Year of Discernment was not a time to stop our work. We hoped it would be a time of excitement and refreshment because work felt different from the usual. We did not “lay down” committees or ask committees to stop doing certain things. The goal was a year to discern how to become a community that people love and want to serve, that allows all members to feel that their work fits into the Meeting, that offers members a universal sense of both caring for and being cared for, and that efficiently identifies and recognizes the talents of each member so that we are all left with ample time to deepen our spirituality and community-building. We hoped to be joyful, intentional and corporate in our discernment, to listen to each other and to the Divine, and to listen and share our leadings with one another as we seek a deeper spirituality.

Essentials

Steering Committee members met with every UFM committee and with officers and non-committee members, interested individuals, Young Adult Friends, and other groups, to discuss queries² expanded directly from those in the Year of Discernment proposal. We discovered that for many committees the primary experience of UFM and commitment to the Meeting centered in the work of that particular committee. We also learned that for many committee members, service in their chosen areas was a pleasure and satisfying, rather than a burden.³ Thus, we came to see UFM as composed of many smaller communities and learned that all of UFM current activities were deeply value by those involved.

At the same time, the stress of trying to do many things with limited resources was widely acknowledged. This learning lead the Steering Committee to seek ways to build a more cohesive community and to involve committees in activities such as planning and assisting with

¹ The full text of the proposal is in the Appendices.

² The full text of the questions we asked committees and individuals is in the Appendices.

³ While we reported some of what we learned to the meeting and in *Gleanings* articles, we recognize we could have been more proactive in sharing what we learned. Some of us sent copies of our reports to committee clerks, but we hadn't discussed that useful follow-up, and at least one clerk later regretted not having received feedback. We could have offered to meet again with committees who wanted more conversation and initiated more discussion with the Nominating Committee.

the retreats. We also moved away from considering adjustments to the UFM structure and tried to help prepare the community to unite in choices and ministries.

From the interviews with committees and individuals, the Steering Committee distilled four core values of University Friends Meeting, themes that, over the course of our conversations, UFM community members identified repeatedly or universally as essential to the life and identity of our community. These four core values were: **worship**; care and nurturing of **community** and each other; **stewardship** of our physical, financial, and human resources; and **service** both to Meeting and in the world.

III. What Are We Called To Do?

We are called to be a worshiping community, to be good stewards of our resources, and to help each other discern how we are led to serve. We are also called to care for and support each other.

Based on this understanding of who we are as a community and what we are called to do, the Steering Committee has several recommendations for the Meeting and lifts up some areas we see in need of ongoing nurture.

Recommendations

1. We recommend that UFM institute having **two Meeting retreats at the meetinghouse each calendar year**, organized by an ad hoc committee, appointed by the Clerk in consultation with Nominating Committee. Each retreat should include:
 - worship
 - intergenerational activities
 - community building exercises (i.e. discussions, skill building or other activities that speak to the spiritual needs of UFM)
 - a program for children related to the retreat theme
 - work parties focused on the buildings and grounds
 - a shared meal, and
 - fun

Other activities might include: a talent show, skits, or bringing in an outside speaker to focus on a particular issue. We recommend that a planning committee be named for each retreat and that all committees be asked contribute ideas for the themes.⁴

2. We recommend that the business meeting approve the creation of a **Communications Task Force**, named by the Clerk, and charged with reviewing current communications methods and recommending changes that better fit the needs of UFM community and the technology available. Attention must be given to maintaining connection with individuals and households who do not regularly use the internet and email. This task force would be asked to bring a recommendation to business meeting within **three months**.

3. We recommend that the Projects' responsibilities be transferred at least temporarily to a **Remodeling Task Force**, appointed by the Clerk.⁵ It would be the Task Force's job to

⁴ See the Appendices for forms we created for meeting retreats.

determine what needs to be done to restart the remodeling process of the Meeting House. This would include, but is not limited to: reviewing the current remodeling plans, recommending changes if they are indicated, identifying funding and financing sources, and presenting their recommendations to business meeting for approval. The Task Force would prioritize what and in what order specific remodeling jobs should be done, the timing of the remodeling work, and the impact on our renters. It would also determine what would be the best oversight for the projects. The Task Force would consult with Buildings and Grounds and Finance Committees as necessary. This task force would be asked to bring a recommendation to business meeting within **three months**.

4. We recommend that Worship and Ministry Committee **create a formal process for the meeting to follow when individuals express a leading or calling to ministry**. In this process, the Meeting should help discern whether the ministry is individual (and, if so, what support the individual needs) or corporate (and, if so, how the Meeting should take up that ministry). This process of discernment should also continue for the Meeting's current ministries. Tools the Meeting has to support these ministries include clearness and support committees and business meeting.

Ongoing Nurture

Throughout the year, we have noticed a few areas that could use special support, attention, and nurture from the Meeting. We do not have specific recommendations in these areas, but we ask the Meeting to prayerfully consider how to nurture them.

1. **Younger Friends**. We see a need for ongoing nurture of younger Friends, including young families and children, Junior Friends, and Young Adult Friends. We encourage Friends to discern how to incorporate Friends of all ages into the life of the Meeting, and to discern what support and support the Meeting can give to those in transitional stages of life. An example we discussed of lending structure would be to have Worship and Ministry Committee offer to house the YAF mid-week worship at Quaker House. We encourage adults in the Meeting to work with our youth of all ages. We want to acknowledge the work that has been and is being done by the Education Committee, in particular the creation of the curriculum for the school-aged children. People seem excited and welcoming when families attend UFM. However, not enough of us have volunteered for the Education Committee, second adults on Sundays, or to work with Junior Friends.

2. **New clerks**. In meeting with the committees, we saw many differences in how committees functioned. We ask the Meeting to think about ways to support individuals who feel led to clerk committees by providing help in their transition into clerking and being clear about the expectations of a committee and the committee clerk. One possibility for this support could

⁵ Over the course of the Year of Discernment it has become clear that the UFM community wishes to remain in our current buildings. Many people have also expressed the desire to finish the remodeling on the Meeting House that was approved by Meeting in 2007. When Projects and Upkeep were merged to form Buildings and Grounds Committee (B&G), the new committee took on responsibility for facilitating the remainder of remodeling the Meeting House. Since then, B&G has been very busy with completing both routine and deferred maintenance tasks. We have consulted with the Clerk of B&G and have his blessings for this recommendation.

include a gathering of all committee clerks (experienced and new) to talk about what it means to clerk. Alternatively, new clerks could have a mentor who has served as a clerk in the past.

3. **Communication between committees and the Meeting.** We encourage the Meeting community to continue the Clerk's current practice of having committees report on their work at business meeting. In addition, we want committees to move beyond business meeting and to use other venues, such as *Gleanings*, the website, and Coordinating Committee, to educate and excite the rest of the community.

4. **Outreach.** As people talked about what was memorable and important to them in their time with UFM, the theme of outreach emerged. We propose that the Meeting consider formalizing a variety of kinds of outreach both to people who find UFM on their own and to people who have not met us. An example of outreach to people who have not met us is Quaker Quest; we could also offer more education about UFM and Quakerism to attenders. There seems to be an increase in connection with the student community of the University of Washington; we wonder about once again reaching out to them. Another suggestion is to organize quarterly gatherings for individuals who have been attending the Meeting for less than a year.

5. **Sharing our experiences of the Spirit.** In our final retreat, some Friends shared their desire to have space to talk about our experiences of the Divine, which we call by many names. This is a growing edge for the Meeting, as faith language makes some members uncomfortable. It also requires Friends to get to know each other better, which can be difficult in such a large meeting. One way the Meeting can encourage Friends to share is through smaller groups that focus on deepening worship and giving space to share personal experiences. Examples that currently exist include the Adult Religious Education hour, spiritual sharing groups, and Meeting retreats. We hope that Friends will encourage each other to share their experiences and listen though an individual's language for the meaning behind it.

IV. WHAT HAVE WE DONE THIS YEAR?

Below is a list of some of the things that have happened in University Friends Meeting since the approval of the Year of Discernment proposal. The Year of Discernment Steering Committee in no way claims credit for all of the items listed. The Steering Committee assisted in facilitating some items, but many others happened through the initiative of committees, or as gifts from individuals to Meeting. However, one of our major themes and goals for the year has been identifying and recognizing UFM's many ministries and getting to know better what others in Meeting are doing. We feel we have helped to increase general awareness of these activities and contributed to a greater understanding of how they enrich the life of the Meeting.

- ❖ We held four retreats with the purpose of strengthening the four essentials, to get to know each other and our work better, and to create broader and deeper understanding of the practice of discernment. Our retreats focused on worship, individual discernment, corporate discernment, and the nature and meaning of community. In order to continue connecting committee work to the wider UFM community, committees were involved in various aspects of the retreat programming.

- ❖ The shift from Nominating Committee's original vision (the "Sabbath Year") to what Meeting united on (the Year of Discernment) could perhaps be summed up as a shift from "doing different work" to "thinking differently about our work." Thinking about our existing work with greater intention and has without a doubt generated a great deal of new energy and a stronger sense of community in UFM.
- ❖ Hospitality Committee was folded into Friends Center Committee, and the former Projects and Upkeep committees were merged to form the Building & Grounds Committee.
- ❖ A well-attended information and discussion session was held about the maintenance, repair, and remodel needs of our current buildings and their financial impact.
- ❖ We spent many person-hours of labor on the meetinghouse building and grounds and completed many much-needed tasks, including: installation of the auditory enhancement system in the worship room; cleaning out the office (including removal of the old office safe), storage closet, and lunchroom; and removing standing water from the roof.
- ❖ We have continued to build relationships with the people in the SHARE/WHEEL shelter group that sleeps in the Worship Room. Members of the group have participated in Meeting activities and one attends worship regularly. The group renamed itself to reflect their growing connection to UFM.
- ❖ We have a monthly Arts Salon where community members share visual art, music, poetry, and fellowship.
- ❖ We have seen an increase in the number of Young Adult Friends attending and becoming involved in the Meeting. One household of YAFs started mid-week worship. An older couple in Meeting has held four potlucks at their home for YAFs.
- ❖ Many people read and participated in conversations or discussion groups about the book Three Cups of Tea, by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin.
- ❖ We held our first Memorial Meeting for Grieving and Healing.
- ❖ The Sunday morning Adult Religious Education program has been coordinated with the Year of Discernment, giving participants the opportunity to explore some of its themes in greater depth.
- ❖ We enjoyed a lively Meeting-wide talent show.
- ❖ The First-Day School class has moved into the Lunch Room. This gives them a room of their own and frees up the Social Hall during the 11:00 hour.
- ❖ We have recognized that we are not led to sell Quaker House.

- ❖ We have decided not to participate in the Ecumenical Campus.
- ❖ We have spent time talking about the nature of community at UFM. Our efforts to build community and help people get to know each other have made it easier to have conversations together about the life of the community.
- ❖ We are communicating more through *Gleanings*. The newsletter has focused our attention on themes of the Year of Discernment and related themes as well as Meeting concerns in general.

Overall, Friends in the Meeting know each other better and know more about the community as a whole, including what committees exist and what they do. We know more about the ministries that UFM currently carries and we are learning what they cost us in human, monetary and facility resources. There has also been a shift from seeing committee work as an impediment to full participation in Meeting, something that mediates experience in Meeting, to an actual *site* of community building, spiritual practice, and the life of the Meeting.

A sense of abundance seems to have replaced the worry about scarcity that triggered the need for the Year of Discernment. Committee volunteerism, the number of donors, and participation in meeting for worship have all increased. We are moving towards practicing our discernment from a place of abundance instead of one of scarcity. We feel that we are better prepared as a community to make hard choices and we hope that the Meeting will continue to consider what we should lay down in light of our leadings and resources.

By working together toward simple objectives, we were reminded of the power of a community where each makes a contribution from individual strengths to release others to apply their strengths. We experienced, again and again, times when we felt equal concern for one another, and equal appreciation for what others were sharing with us. In those times, we were in the presence of the spiritual life of our community and its power.

V. QUERIES

Is thinking differently about our existing work seen as a means to an end, or as an end in itself?

Does Meeting still see the ultimate goal of the process as a shift back to thinking in terms of “doing different work” (and if so, what)?

For ongoing discernment related to our current ministries: What has life? What should we lay down? How are we supporting our individual and corporate ministries?

How does prophetic witness fit with the four essentials we identified in the meeting (worship, community, stewardship, and service)?

What is our understanding of discernment now and how should we continue the work after the Year of Discernment?

VI. APPENDICES

Suggested Readings for the Year of Discernment
Year of Discernment Charge from Monthly Meeting
Queries given to Committees and Individuals
Reports from talking to the committees and individuals
Samples of *Gleanings* articles
Samples of Reports to Business Meeting
Samples of Sunday Announcements
UFM Ministries and their histories
Example of *Gleanings* article on UFM Ministries: Subcommittee on Homeless
Retreat schedules and evaluation forms
Sample work-party sign up sheet
Summaries of evaluation for first and last retreats