

2013 QuakerQuest Case Studies

Eau Claire Monthly Meeting, Wisconsin

Interview with Esther Hinshaw

Workshop: March 2009 Prep Session: November 2010

Public Sessions: Spring 2011

In 2009, Eau Claire Friends Meeting in Wisconsin was ready for a change. In addition to seeking numerical growth and greater age diversity, Friends longed for a more vital embodiment of their faith in the world. Meeting member Esther Hinshaw recalls a shared feeling within the meeting that “we have something good to offer, but folks didn’t know much about our path to spirituality.” In order to make Eau Claire Friends more widely known as an active presence in the community and to “vitalize” the spiritual practices within the meeting, it was time for something new.

Even before participating in the Quaker Quest Full Day Workshop in March 2009, Friends at Eau Claire were reaching clarity about planning a series of Public Sessions. According to Esther, “It was dotting the I’s and crossing the T’s at that point.” While there was some concern about the financial investment required for organizing and publicizing Public Sessions, the real cost to the meeting was unexpected: “We didn’t anticipate how much time it would take. It was the time and energy that was most costly.” Nevertheless, Friends embarked on the journey.

As they took steps toward planning their series of Public Sessions in Spring 2011, Eau Claire Meeting sought to spread the message that “anybody and everybody was welcome.” To publicize the events, Friends contracted with a professional writer who was “in spirit” with Quakers to create a press release and worked with a graphic designer to generate a uniform design for their materials. They displayed a banner in front of the meetinghouse, sponsored frequent local radio announcements geared to reach a “sympathetic audience,” placed ads in local and alternative newspapers, and distributed postcards and flyers throughout Eau Claire. The total cost of the publicity campaign was \$1750, with a grant from Friends General Conference offsetting much of this investment. In reflecting on the success of their publicity strategies, Esther notes that “personal contacts worked the best. We have some outgoing members with large social networks who talked with a lot of people about coming.”

Esther describes Eau Claire Meeting as a more welcoming community following their engagement with Quaker Quest and observes that “we have increased our number of regular attenders since Quaker Quest, but it’s hard to pin this exactly on Quaker Quest.” Each Public Session brought in about 15-20 visitors, and a class of 30 college students attended one evening, but the growth over time has been smaller than expected. After the Public Sessions, “we had a few people try us out for a while and then drop away.” One couple continues to attend regularly.

Although the demographics of the meeting membership stayed constant, Quaker Quest sparked an inward process of connection and spiritual expansion that transformed the culture of Eau Claire Friends Meeting. For over a year, before they offered their Public Sessions, every regular member and attender was invited to do one or more presentation to the meeting, modeled on the Quaker Quest format. Esther describes this as a time of growing appreciation for each other and their diverse spiritual journeys: “We started thinking differently about ourselves as a spiritual community” and as a result, “we’re tighter. We know each other better; we’re more spiritually intimate. There is a more conscious attempt to improve the quality of our worship... On the surface, the average Sunday worship feels the same and looks the same. The change is in how we think about it and talk about it.”

As they prepared for Public Sessions by listening to each other’s stories, Friends experienced a transformation in the interactions among members, attenders, and newcomers. “We’ve learned how complex Quakerism is, how complex we as individuals being Friends is. We learned that there’s no right way. We’re all pretty sensitive to the ongoing search being important.” The sharing of stories allowed Friends to understand the deep longings of seekers and to become more open to the gifts newcomers bring: “We have a more active desire to have people join us and I think it shows.”

Esther describes the Quaker Quest process as transformative among Friends in Eau Claire: “We had done a variety of kinds of outreach through the years. This wasn’t a new thing for us... But it was probably more effective than what we had done before.” The “vitalization” experienced within Eau Claire Meeting can serve as a model for the possibilities available for other Quaker communities. She proposes that “there’s no reason not to [do Quaker Quest.] You have lots of potential gains from it. It’s worth exploring. There’s no downside.”

Multnomah Friends Meeting, Portland, OR

Interview with Rick Seifert, Annis Bleeke, Ron Marson, Glee Lumb

Workshop: January 2011

Quakers at Multnomah Friends Meeting in Portland, Oregon, have much to celebrate. With a new meetinghouse and a steady stream of visitors, the meeting feels energetic and optimistic. Although the growth of membership had slowed, member Rick Seifert observed that “there’s a spirit alive in our meeting and it’s attracting people to our door. The challenge to us is to bring them up in the Society of Friends. That’s where the real challenge is – what do we do with people when they come through the door?” Recognizing that they shared this struggle with the broader Quaker community encouraged Friends at Multnomah to seek transformation not only for their meeting, but also for the sake of Quakers in general. Rick remembers sharing a sense of responsibility for the advancement of the Society: “If we don’t do [something], in 50 years there won’t be any Quakers.”

As a thriving community already engaged in outreach, “Quaker Quest fit into the flow of a conversation we were already having.” When the meeting’s clerk proposed hosting a Full Day Workshop in Winter 2011, the suggestion was quickly approved. Glee Lumb recalls that, as an attender, this was “an invitation to be part of the future of Quakerism. I was excited to listen and learn who they are as Quakers and what to do with that.” Similarly, Ron Marson points to a shared sense of possibility: “I thought it was a cool name – Quaker Quest... It just sounded like something new was in the air.” After participating in the workshop, however, Friends questioned the need to adopt the Public Sessions model of outreach. Ron remembers Friends asking each other, “Aren’t we already Quaker Quest? Don’t we have newcomers in droves visiting each month? ... Do we need to do specific public outreach?” Ultimately, the community discerned that “we didn’t feel called to it.”

Although Multnomah Friends were not led to pursue a formal program for outreach, the months and years following the Quaker Quest Full Day Workshop have been fruitful and transformative for the meeting. Learnings from Quaker Quest prompted a series of intentional and concrete changes, including the transition from *greeting* visitors at the door to *welcoming* and *accompanying* newcomers. There is now a group of 2-3 welcomers at the door before worship who engage visitors, show them around the meetinghouse, and accompany them to worship. Rick describes this shift as deliberate and thoughtful: “We role-played and trained ourselves to greet different visitors,” including newcomers who were shy, those cautiously checking out the Quaker Way, or folks very familiar with Quakers. The warm culture of welcoming adopted by Multnomah Meeting transformed members and attenders as well as seekers. “I’m genuinely curious about the people that come to be among us. I used to fear approaching new people... Now there’s just a basic curiosity about ‘Who are you?’ That’s the fundamental of Quaker Quest – to recognize our common humanity, to be curious, and to listen.”

Intentionally reaching out to make sure visitors feel comfortable also prompted careful attention to the use of Quaker jargon, which many members began to recognize as a barrier separating “insiders” from “outsiders.” With this in mind, Friends changed the sign on their building to state “Multnomah Friends Meeting” in order to avoid the more confusing phrase “Monthly Meeting.” Rick notes, “We still struggle with what to call things... We are known by the words we use.”

The Full Day Workshop initiated a time of spiritual deepening among members and attenders at Multnomah Friends. As Glee observes, “After the Full Day Workshop, we recognized a hunger for deeper conversations about what Quakers are. Are we Christians? Are there people who don’t identify as Christians? There was a need to talk about that... Before Quaker Quest, our expression of our faith was veiled.” Now, Friends describe their meeting community as “radically inclusive” and more open to sharing deeper conversations about Quaker worship and individual spiritual journeys.

This sharing of Quaker spirituality and practices extends beyond the life of the meeting and into the wider Portland community. When the local Occupy group needed a space for organizing, Multnomah Friends offered the use of their meetinghouse. As with other community groups that rent space from the meeting, many activists became interested in Quaker process and some began attending meeting for worship. Yet Annis Bleeke, a longtime Friend, remembers that honoring Quaker values within the Occupy movement challenged Friends to practice integrity and communicate clearly: “We had to stand in a Quaker center in the midst of all the winds... to maintain a strong center... The Full Day Workshop gave a few people some practice in talking about what it means to be Quakers.” In addition to engaging with movements like Occupy, Multnomah Friends have fostered a culture of living as “Public Quakers” in their daily lives. Glee chooses to explain the decisions she makes as she navigates the world by noting, “I’m doing this because I’m a Quaker. I carry the Quaker way of being out into the greater world to make an impact in that way.” Similarly, Rick follows the model of Quaker founder George Fox: “I’m much more open about being a Quaker in my community where I live... We *are* patterns. We *are* examples. The examples come to us through our Quaker Way and I say that to people.”

Having embraced a commitment to living intentionally as individuals and as a spiritual community, Friends at Multnomah are optimistic about the future of their meeting and Quakers in general. Annis observes, “As long as we keep working at stuff like this [welcoming and language], we will speak to people and we will speak to young people.” Friends encourage other meetings to adopt the Quaker Quest values of “growth, understanding, outreach, change, and talking to each other” and to “take Quaker Quest one step at a time.” Their advice?: “Make it your own... It is your experience and what comes out of it will be uniquely yours... There’s so much to be learned.”

Palo Alto Friends Meeting, California

Interview with Talley Kenyon

Workshop: November 2012

Palo Alto Friends Meeting is a transient meeting community. Many members and attenders live quite a distance from the meetinghouse or reside in Silicon Valley for only a few years, creating challenges as Friends seek to build community and conduct meeting business. In addition, meeting member Talley Kenyon notes that Friends also struggle with integrating newcomers into the life of the meeting: “We get a LOT of visitors every Sunday, but how do we get people who are only around for a short time involved in Quaker life?” Although attracting individual visitors is not a problem in Palo Alto, the meeting lacks a visible presence within the community. After a local tragedy, Friends became involved in a suicide prevention network and came to see that Quakers were not publicly known, even among neighbors of the meetinghouse and within the wider community of churches. As Talley laments, “People in Palo Alto don’t know that we exist. How do we let people know we’re there? We could be their *home!*”

Some members of Palo Alto Meeting had been exposed to Quaker Quest during a visit to England and advocated that the meeting schedule a Full Day Workshop with Friends General Conference. Talley recalls that Friends were “excited about what [Quaker Quest] might promise” in their community. Given an aging membership, a limited number of young adults and families, and their challenges with distance and commitment, Friends in Palo Alto discerned a need for introspection and action: “We wanted a chance to come together and think about why we’re all Quakers and what we might offer people. [We asked ourselves,] is there something we can do?” Following the Full Day Workshop in November 2012, there was some discussion about moving forward with Public Sessions, but concerns about the commitment of time and energy it would require led Friends to discern to focus instead on in-reach and getting to know each other better.

Although the meeting’s participation in the Full Day Workshop had little impact on numerical attendance, the conversations and insights raised during the Quaker Quest activities sparked changes within Palo Alto Friends Meeting that reflect a commitment to inclusion and community engagement. After seeing their meetinghouse and grounds “through new eyes” during the workshop, Friends adopted a series of projects to improve the appearance of the meetinghouse and to create a more welcoming environment for newcomers. These projects included clearing overgrown shrubs, installing new flooring in the meetinghouse, and increasing the visibility of the meeting’s street sign. Friends also engaged in collaboration with the nursery school situated in front of the meetinghouse in order to better share the space and bring Palo Alto Friends Meeting out of hiding.

During the Quaker Quest Full Day Workshop, Friends invited the full participation of teenagers from the meeting. Comments and suggestions from the teenagers during the workshop, including the desire to know more about the history and

diversity of Quakers and wanting better relationships with adults, shaped the structure of the teen program throughout the following year. Similarly, many adults expressed a longing for intergenerational connections with the meeting's children. This led to the coordination of a semi-programmed family worship designed to engage kids. The First Day School Committee also adopted a strengthened commitment to staying in touch with families and now publicizes the program for First Day School each week, prompting some families to attend meeting for worship more often. In reporting on these shifts in youth programming, Talley recalls, "We wanted the voices of young people to be heard."

In seeking to become more welcoming to newcomers and better known as a presence in their community, Friends in Palo Alto have engaged in strategies for both in-reach and out-reach. To get to know each other on a deeper level, the still-active Quaker Quest Core Group wrote and distributed a series of concerns and queries which are read before meeting for worship and shared within committees to spark conversations. In addition, the atmosphere of greeting and welcoming newcomers has become more intentional. Within the wider community, a local initiative to provide hospitality for individuals living in their cars prompted Palo Alto Friends to engage in unintended outreach. Talley observes that citing Quaker values during conversations with neighbors of the meetinghouse and with the city at large during public meetings demonstrated for people in Palo Alto, "who we are, how we do things, and why we think the way we think."

Participating in the Quaker Quest Full Day Workshop invited members and attenders at Palo Alto Friends to recognize some of the struggles they face and to articulate their vision for the meeting's future. As Talley notes, however, "change is a challenging process." Friends continue to explore some potential avenues for change, including a conversation about making the meeting's website more welcoming, outreach to young adults at Stanford University, and possibly organizing a day of in-reach modeled on the format of Quaker Quest Public Sessions. Talley's advice to other Quakers considering scheduling a Quaker Quest workshop is simple: "Do it.... Be prepared that you will end up with work that you didn't realize needed to be done and that it will also energize conversations that can be ongoing and can go in different ways. You won't necessarily see changes within one year, even, but it has potential. And include your young people!"

West Newton Friends Church

Interview with Lynn Mills

Workshop: September 2011 Prep Session: February 2012

Public Sessions: Spring 2012, Autumn 2013

A rural congregation with shrinking membership, members of West Newton Friends Church outside of Indianapolis feared their church was dying. As longtime Friend Lynn Mills recalls, “We were so low in energy, we weren’t having really deep conversations.” As attendance declined over the years, Friends had started worshipping in the smaller fellowship hall in the rear of the church, leaving their spacious meeting room empty on Sunday mornings. In 2011, the community discerned that “we do something or we die.”

Friends in West Newton invited Friends General Conference to present the Quaker Quest Full Day Workshop when a member who was familiar with the program suggested they try it. Reflecting on this decision, Lynn Mills noted, “We’d been struggling for a long time. It was the most hopeful suggestion of something to do.” Engaging in the Full Day Workshop offered meeting members a sense of hope and the possibility for revitalization: “We may still die... [but] at least we would go down kicking.”

Following the Full Day Workshop, West Newton Friends Church offered a series of Public Sessions during Spring 2012. Given their motivation to prevent their community from dying out, the decision to go forward with Public Sessions was quickly discerned, with some members feeling very clearly that Quaker Quest was something that Friends were being led to do. The primary concern raised during discernment was the investment of time and resources necessary for success. As Lynn notes, “We could see what [Public Sessions] could do, but we questioned whether we had the energy to pull it off.” Because of this, the planning process for the Public Sessions required a balance of optimism and realism, with the Core Group adjusting the program to reflect the small size of the congregation. Each Public Session featured two speakers rather than the prescribed three. Members who did not serve as presenters contributed their gifts to the planning in other ways, such as through food preparation and coordinating the publicity.

Friends in West Newton spread the word about their Quaker Quest Public Sessions by playfully responding to common misconceptions about Quakers. They created postcards, posters, and an electronic billboard on a major state highway featuring the phrase “Quakers are more than...” next to an image of a bowl of oatmeal and a link to the meeting’s website. In addition, members wrote a press release, contacted the religion department of local colleges and universities, displayed a banner on the church lawn, created a series of YouTube videos, organized a Meet-Up group, and purchased ads on Facebook. Friends found sharing postcards with their neighbors, engaging with social media, and submitting a press release to be the most successful

publicity strategies in their community. The publicity campaign for their Public Sessions cost approximately \$500.

In the months following their Full Day Workshop, West Newton Friends found themselves becoming united around a shared vision, a project they could pursue together to strengthen and possibly grow their meeting community: “[Quaker Quest] gave us the energy and courage to look at what else we could do, to experiment.” In reflecting on the impact of Quaker Quest on West Newton Friends Church, Lynn also points to the presence of “more life in the meeting than there had been... Our awareness of our desire for a deeper spiritual life has been raised.” In addition, “We are more comfortable with who we are, where we are, and our own sense of leadership.” This transformation is evident in the new ways members and attenders are coming together in community. More “meat” has been added to Adult Sunday School lessons and creative leadership has emerged as Friends have adopted shared responsibility for leading worship during the search for a new pastor. One practical change resulting from the Full Day Workshop was the rearranging of the meeting room and a return to worshipping in that space.

The Full Day Workshop exercises also prompted Friends to ask themselves what it means to be Quakers at West Newton Friends Church. Editing the templates of handouts prepared by FGC to faithfully represent their community’s beliefs required introspection and sparked deep conversations, “making us look at ourselves so we could explain ourselves.” In addition to preparing these resources for newcomers to the Quaker Way, West Newton Friends made a concerted effort to become more connected to the wider Quaker community by keeping Friends in other local meetings informed of their activities and events.

An average of six visitors attended each Public Session, with at least half of the visitors coming from other Quaker meetings in the area. One man who had been away from Quakers for decades came to the Public Sessions with his wife and the couple now attends worship regularly. The public response to the Public Sessions confirmed for Friends that there are people in their community who want what Quakers have to offer. In addition, because of their Public Session outreach and publicity, West Newton Friends Church has become known as “adventuresome” among local Quaker meetings. According to Lynn, “We have a reputation for being very lively and willing to experiment.”

The positivity of Quaker Quest continues to energize Friends at West Newton Friend Church. With their newfound sense of optimism, they are preparing to offer a second series of Public Sessions in Autumn 2013. Based on the uplifting experience she shared with her community, Lynn Mills encourages meetings to consider participating in Quaker Quest: “You ought to try it. Even if you don’t do anything past the Full Day Workshop, it’s a really positive experience for a meeting. It got us off dead center... If you feel like God is leading you to do Quaker Quest, you should. Way will open.”

Scarsdale Friends Meeting, New York

Interview with: Mary Eagleson, Ginny Blanford

(Additional Documentation: Carol Wilkinson)

Workshops: April 2008, April 2012 Prep Session: January 2013

Public Sessions: Spring 2013

Throughout the past decade, Scarsdale Friends Meeting in New York State has faced a sense of uncertainty about the future. As longtime member Ginny Blanford recalls, “We were feeling that the meeting was a bit scattered and morale was low. We had lost many of the lynchpins of the meeting over the past ten years.” Meeting membership was aging, the Advancement Committee had been dissolved, and the community watched with sadness as another meeting within their Quarter was laid down. According to Mary Eagleson, “We looked at ourselves and saw 25 or 30 of us. We could go the way of Stamford-Greenwich Meeting. It’s easy to imagine. But we don’t want to go the way of Stamford-Greenwich. So, that was a motivation [to do something different].”

Within this context of seeking change, Scarsdale Friends wondered whether Quaker Quest might offer the revitalization they longed for. Although energy in the meeting turned toward managing major renovations on the meetinghouse following a Full Day Workshop in April 2008, some in the community held tight to the possibilities offered by Quaker Quest and persuaded the rest to invite Friends General Conference to present a second Full Day Workshop four years later, in April 2012. This re-introduction to the in-reach and outreach model of Quaker Quest sparked many conversations among Friends in Scarsdale, especially as the meeting considered whether to go forward with hosting Public Sessions. Ginny remembers some Friends weighing their many commitments and questioning, “If we don’t get new members out of this, is it worth the work?” Others, as Mary recalls, expressed “a lot of satisfaction with how we are as we are.” As she observes, “Opening the circle to new people is not real easy.”

This hesitation to commit to the process of Public Sessions is best reflected in an ongoing conversation about whether Scarsdale Quakers were ready to successfully undertake the project. With some members expressing a deep desire to engage in in-reach before considering outreach, the question of scheduling Public Sessions was discussed over multiple meetings for business. Ginny recalls that proponents of Quaker Quest saw the potential for Public Sessions to address the concerns of the community: “If we don’t commit to Public Sessions, we’ll just be spinning our wheels. We could go endlessly saying, ‘We’re not ready. We’re not ready.’ So, we need to put dates on the calendar and get ourselves ready!” Eventually, a group of members and attenders who were enthusiastic about Quaker Quest discerned to go forward with Public Sessions, coupled with a parallel commitment to emphasize in-reach within Scarsdale Meeting. They reminded the meeting, “This is not only about getting new people. It’s as much about strengthening ourselves and getting to know each other.” At this point, the concern that “We need to be ready before scheduling Public Sessions” shifted to “We will

get ready by getting ready!” Part of this getting ready took the form of organizing Adult Spiritual Nurture groups and “sprucing up” the meetinghouse through the addition of lighting and signage, landscape improvements, and refinishing the meeting room benches.

Scarsdale Friends Meeting offered a series of Quaker Quest Public Sessions in Spring 2013. While the Core Group did almost all of the behind-the-scenes work, the planning and implementation of the Public Sessions engaged many meeting members and attenders, who served as presenters, hosts, greeters, small group leaders, hospitality organizers, and childcare providers. An average of two newcomers attended each Public Session, and several attended more than one event. Perhaps more importantly, as member Carol Wilkinson recalls, “the worship following each program was profound and deep, the stillness almost palpable.”

The meeting budgeted \$7000 for Quaker Quest and spent just over \$6800. A \$1000 grant from FGC helped make the publicity campaign a success. Friends publicized their Public Sessions through newspaper ads and articles in local and county papers, online announcements on public calendars, ads in two countywide parenting magazines, posters in the commuter rail station, ads on community radio and television, banners outside of meetinghouse, and press releases shared with local newspapers and media groups. They found that the best response stemmed from the ads and articles in local newspapers and the flyers posted in the train stations. Although the publicity team never figured out how to reach the local LGBTQ community, they consider their overall advertising strategy successful.

The preparation and presentation of Public Sessions fostered among Friends in Scarsdale a sense of community and connection unanticipated by the meeting. Ginny describes this as an opportunity to get to know each other’s lives: “What was really amazing was what I learned about everyone in the meeting... The presenters were telling incredible stories from their lives and it was such a deepening experience. I think everyone will tell you that.” Similarly, “It feels richer... There had been a period where we felt things were on a decline and important people had left the meeting or passed away... That really has reversed itself. There has been a deepening in the meeting altogether.”

In addition to this inward transformation, the meeting has developed a more open and attentive attitude toward the experience of seekers. Mary notes, “There has always been a small trickle of new people and some of them stay. We talked about what it feels like to be brand new.” This conversation invited members and attenders to practice being more intentional in building relationships with newcomers beyond the first few weeks of attendance. Engaging in Public Sessions brought similar changes within the meeting’s youth programming. This is reflected in a more positive feeling about the First Day School program: “Even though our parenting Public Sessions were the least attended, it seems like more people are showing up with children... We now have two or three new families with young children over the past two years. They didn’t come through Quaker Quest, but somehow the vibes must have gone out and reached them.”

While the overall experience of coordinating and hosting Quaker Quest Public Sessions brought energy and a deeper sense of community to Friends at Scarsdale Meeting, members of the Core Group describe some frustrations that emerged during the process. Throughout much of the lead-up to Public Sessions, the Core Group struggled with engaging other committees and meeting members in the planning and preparation. In addition, members of the planning team were disappointed with the Half Day Preparation Session, which they had hoped would offer an opportunity to coordinate practical logistics and hear first-hand stories from other meetings' Public Sessions.

Despite these struggles and some initial resistance, Friends in Scarsdale reflect positively on their experience with Quaker Quest. Carol writes, "The meeting seems in unity that Quaker Quest was an astonishingly successful exercise in building our meeting and getting to know each other much more deeply." Mary attributes much of this success to a sense of humility adopted by a community facing low morale and an uncertain future: "In thinking of in-reach, maybe we can't handle this by ourselves. Maybe we do need to have some help and work on it." Because of the balanced focus on both in-reach and outreach offered by the structure of Quaker Quest, Friends describe the Full Day Workshop as valuable and enriching in itself, regardless of whether a meeting discerns to host Public Sessions. In response to meetings considering engagement with Quaker Quest, Ginny advises jumping in and moving forward: "Don't wait until you're sure you're ready!"