

2010 STATE OF THE MEETING REPORT ASHEVILLE FRIENDS MEETING

Asheville Friends Meeting seems to be in a period of transition. Over the last several years we have seen a small but steady decline in our membership. Our average attendance at Meeting for Worship has dropped about 10% in the last year. This has caused stresses on our Meeting's resources: Members are stretched trying to provide personnel for the various committees. For the first time in recent history we have experienced a budget shortfall. And, perhaps most troubling, we have lost a cohort of high school and college age youth who might have become part of the future of our Society.

Paradoxically, though, there are signs of renewed energy and vitality. We have made special efforts to reach out to visitors and newcomers. We have a new hospitality committee that has sponsored after-Meeting coffee and snacks so attendees are encouraged to stay and socialize after Meeting for Worship. Many members report a deepening sense of closeness to one another. We now offer opportunities to know each other more intimately during our monthly Sandwich Sundays where members are invited to tell about themselves around themes such as "how I came to Quakerism" or "my volunteer work in the community." Weekly opportunities to share our joys and sorrows as well as weekly reminders are designed to assure that the pastoral care committee does not allow any of our members to "fall through the cracks" in times of need. However, even as we rejoice in our deepening sense of community, we are aware of the lack of diversity among us, and our need to find ways to be more inclusive of those who are different.

Many members have expressed a sense of a deepening worship experience as well. We have less vocal ministry and deeper silence. Messages are often deeply felt and Spirit-inspired. And, we have a wider variety of people offering vocal ministry. As one member has put it, "We are a meeting of seekers, and that presents both strengths and challenges."

In addition to our Meeting for Worship on first day, we have a very small but meaningful midweek worship followed by a shared meal of "stone soup." Some members who find it difficult to attend First Day worship have found this experience to be a way to share worship and feel connected to the Meeting. A monthly extended Meeting for Worship has also been provided for those who want to explore a longer worship experience. We also offer spiritual enrichment programs on a variety of topics at least twice a month.

In October, we offered a one-day workshop on clerking, led by Mary Ann Downey. We hope that, as more of our members gain skills in clerking, this will pay dividends in the future, not only in recruiting clerks, but in enabling all of us to understand and participate in Meetings for Business and committee work. We continue to attempt to find balance between getting tasks accomplished and maintaining a sense of worship in our meetings for business.

Although we have only one high-school age youth now active in our Monthly Meeting, we remain committed to our young people. The Meeting has made efforts to support its youths' involvement in SAYF by providing transportation and a "friendly adult presence." We mourned the loss of Gary Briggs, who died on Christmas Eve, and who had been a devoted "FAP" for the last several years.

Finally, we are mindful that our sense of community and caring needs to reach out to the wider Asheville community and, indeed, to the world. We have initiated a policy of regularly collecting food for the MANNA Food Bank and have made a commitment to provide breakfast to the hungry in downtown Asheville on a quarterly basis. Because we are a small Meeting, we have found it helpful to form alliances with like-minded religious groups. We have formed these alliances to support our testimony against racism and the death penalty, for example.

Much of this revitalization came about through a process of focused introspection. We realized that we were shrinking, that the number of youth in our Religious Education program and our SAYF activities was diminishing, that our adult attendance was getting smaller, and we asked ourselves why. We held several meetings and threshing sessions specifically designed to examine these issues. Once we acknowledged the existence of these challenges, we redesigned our first day schedule to make it more desirable for families to attend Meeting for Worship and other first day activities together. The mere act of examining the issues facing us, on its own, seemed to revitalize the spirit of our meeting.