

Asheville Friends Meeting

2018 State of the Meeting Report

As the year 2018 came to a close, our meeting was in a place of guarded hopefulness. The past few years have been troubled as we have dealt with difficult issues and have wrestled with what it means to be a community. We have struggled to communicate thoughtfully and we have lost some of our resiliency. Our dream of being a welcoming, inclusive, and spirit-led meeting is still alive though, and inspires us to dig deep and work hard. We have a long way to go on our journey as a meeting.

It is clear that we need to resume racial justice training so we can develop skills to recognize and confront racism in ourselves and in our community. We need to deepen our understanding of institutional systemic racism and white supremacy and share this reality with our older children in meeting so they are well informed as they become teens and young adults. The ongoing challenge to those of us who are white is to be aware of our white privilege. We will not be able to respond in love and compassion to the needs of friends of color until we focus on our own understanding of how we cause hurt.

In an attempt to work on this issue, our Racial Justice Committee presented several forums using the book, Becoming An Anti-Racist Church by Joseph Barndt. We looked at how our own practices are rooted in racism and how we can try to overcome this in our meeting. More discussion is needed as we get into the last part of the book. Our challenge is to increase participation in these discussions so we can develop a shared understanding of what racial justice means today.

When discussing racial justice issues we feel the tension between the testimony of integrity and the testimony of community. We want to speak our truth with courage and conviction while remaining respectful and open to the truth of others. A case in point is over the use of the term "white supremacy" to describe our role in maintaining racism. Members feel strongly about the use of this term and at times we forget that these are beloved (F)friends with whom we disagree. We have realized that we need to use tenderness with those among us who struggle or do not struggle with our racism. We need to encourage each other to be open to the new ideas today's racial justice work requires. To do this we will need to build trust in each other, so we can share and confront our personal truths. At this time, we do not all have that trust, but we are working to rebuild it.

In this time of increasing nationalism in our country, some immigrants experience increasing prejudice but none more than those who are here without documents. Asheville Friends Meeting partnered with CIMA (Compañeros Inmigrantes de las Montañas en Acción), the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Asheville (the hosting Congregation) and other faith communities to offer sanctuary to some who are at risk of summary deportation. We have minuted our support as well as offered financial support and endless hours of volunteer companionship.

Another area of concern expressed by many in Meeting is our need for right relationship with Indigenous peoples. A member of Meeting went to the Pendle Hill workshop on this issue and is helping Peace and Earth develop education for our meeting and the wider community about the role of Quakers in the boarding school movement and our presence on Cherokee land.

Our Peace and Earth and Racial Justice Committees continue to shepherd our outreach to Quaker and other organizations. Once again, we were able to dedicate a third of our budget to the important work being done in the broader community. Throughout the year, we collected food for MANNA food bank, toiletries for A HOPE Hospitality House for the homeless, and snacks and hygiene products for a Little Free Food Pantry. We also supported some walkers in the local CROP Walk to end hunger in our community.

Our community becomes stronger when we can help each other in times of need. Several families in Meeting have been in transition this past year and we did what we could to support them as they faced the joys and challenges that surround transition. Improved communication within Meeting, thanks in part to our Communications Committee, helped us be more responsive as need arises. Still, we could be more supportive of each other.

The number of children in Meeting continues to grow. Our meeting has a vibrant First Day School with weekly attendance of between 10-20 children. We currently don't have a youth group, but plan to begin one again next year. While we don't have any teens active with Southern Appalachian Young Friends (SAYF), we enjoyed hosting their retreats. Our Junior Business Meetings were productive and gave voice to the needs and desires of our meeting's children. In June we welcomed the birth of Essence Villatoro-Weir-Grant. She is a third-generation Asheville Friend and a precious addition to our meeting family.

In 2018, our First Day School (FDS) invited Meeting members and attenders to share their heartfelt connections with favorite Bible stories, we examined ways children and teens can speak up when something seems wrong and needs changing, and we began a new exploration of the testimonies. Programming has been challenging with a large spread in ages within our FDS and uncertain attendance each week. We have recognized the need to provide some deeper-level instruction with our older children.

Our multigenerational events co-led by the Religious Education and the Spiritual Enrichment Committees continue to bring adults and children together. In the beginning of the year, we had the largest Secret Pal exchange since the beginning of this popular program. In the spring, our Youth Celebration gave everyone a chance to learn more about our children and celebrate their role in our meeting. In the winter we began a new Simple Christmas tradition where all ages came together to decorate cookies, make bird treats, and enjoy a wide range of crafts.

Our hearts were saddened in 2018 by the passing of our dear Friend, Alan Robinson, a former clerk of the Meeting. He was a man of many talents and lived a rich life that many of us knew nothing about. He gave a lot of himself to the meeting and we miss him.

Toward the end of the year we came together as a community with a meeting-wide retreat led by Debra Shaw. We explored what it means to be a compassionate Quaker. Participants shared deeply and envisioned ways to be in relationship with others within our meeting community and in the broader community.

Our year ended with our eyes focused on the future. Our Business Meeting approved the formation of a Long-Range Planning and Visioning Committee that will gather the many voices of meeting into a cohesive plan for the future. We will begin by envisioning what we want for our meeting. From there, we can put in place the things we need. We have a lot of work ahead of us as we become the meeting we want to be. We need more involvement on Meeting committees so the work is spread out among more people. We need to strengthen our spiritual muscles for sitting with unsafe feelings and being uncomfortable, and we need to be patient with each other as we move into the new year.