

State of the Meeting 2020 Asheville Friends Meeting

The year 2020 was a year of unforeseen challenges that would test our meeting throughout the year. The pandemic, the endless misinformation, the economic downturn, the killing of George Floyd, the endless election cycle, just to name a few. In our shock and grief we have struggled individually and as a Meeting to fashion an appropriate and Spirit-informed response to these stresses. Our Meeting members and attenders have supported one another and responded to these many challenges with appropriate seriousness and caution. As we look back on 2020, we are grateful for the efforts of so many Friends that have helped bring our Meeting and our community through this most difficult year.

Sensing the enormity of the toll that the approaching pandemic was going to take on the world, for many of us this became a more prayerful time. One of the first efforts we took was to encourage folks to join together in Spirit at 7pm daily and hold healthcare and other essential workers in the Light for ten minutes. Being cautious and in light of what we were learning about best practices toward the pandemic, we stopped meeting in person in March. Thanks to the dedication of the tech-savvy members of Meeting, we began holding weekly Meeting for Worship and monthly business meetings on Zoom. Our Ministry and Counsel Committee began the process of maintaining connection by using our directory to create email and phone lists. This gave us the tools we needed to keep in touch with folks regularly. By dividing the phone list up and finding volunteers to make calls regularly we strengthened our individual connections. Members sent cards and visited folks, masked and at safe distance, who were most isolated or having health concerns. On a handful of joyous occasions when the weather was nice, we met for socially distanced and masked worship on the lawn.

Several in Meeting provided needed transportation for groceries and medical appointments. Boxes of food were delivered to several isolated individuals and families. Families sent cards and visited folks who were most isolated or having some health concerns. It was shared in the Digest for publication the name of a mourning group which was bringing people together to share their grief around losses due to COVID. Inspired by a desire of Asheville Friends to do something for the community, a fundraiser was planned and carried out with great success. The proceeds went to local organizations working with homelessness and food insecurity.

The COVID pandemic has caused some unanticipated consequences to the environment, some of them positive. The decrease in air travel has lowered carbon emissions. Once we realized that we could not meet at the Meetinghouse, our House and Grounds committee did what they could to shut it down; setting the thermostat at 55 degrees and turning off the refrigerator. Several folks in Meeting made cloth masks to help with supply, which also reduced our use of disposable masks. Individuals in Meeting concerned with the abundance of take-out containers being used, have approached local restaurants. They have been

encouraging the use of compostable containers rather than plastic and styrofoam that cannot be recycled.

Inspired by the work of our Racial Justice Committee we are building on the work begun in the past with the book Becoming An Anti-Racist Church, by reading and discussing through the year Robin DiAngelo's White Fragility and Resmaa Menaken's My Grandmother's Hands, an amazing work on racialized trauma. These readings and discussions helped us to grow our understanding of systemic racism, the language of white supremacist culture and ways of mending within ourselves, our meeting and the community around us. Having a safe place to share deeply and emotionally, practice language and make mistakes has opened us up to a deeper level of connection. Participation in these discussions has increased through the year. Over time more and more individuals in our meeting are finding ways to work in the community at large toward a more racially equitable culture.

While we were horrified by the very visible murder of George Floyd, we realized that this is one of so many unjust deaths in our society. In response to racial injustice in our own community, we began talking about reparations and other actions that we can undertake by supporting on-going work in our Black and Brown communities. We have chosen to prioritize contracting needed work with businesses owned by People of Color.

We have learned more this year about the history of Quaker boarding schools and their cruel methods of making Native American children give up their culture and native language and learn English. We acknowledge the great harm that has been done to the Cherokee and other indigenous people. Unfortunately it continues today as we see the high incidence of COVID in the indigenous populations during the pandemic.

The quality of the virtual Meeting for Business has been maintained, allowing lengthy discussion which allowed all who wanted to share to give their opinion. Our business meetings have been almost as well attended as before quarantine. In some cases committees have met via conference call to accommodate individual needs. Committees have cooperated, allowing outreach to be maintained. Our one week fundraiser made it possible to contribute \$6,600 to the homeless and food insecure. The weekly email Digest has helped folks to be aware of business being conducted. We feel it is important to continue paying the workers in our Meeting, whether or not they are working during the pandemic. We have supported organizations that are helping the homeless and food insecure, many of them people of color, who are residing in our community. We also organized a food collection to go to MANNNA food bank which is distributed to people with food insecurity.

We were grateful for the caution and leadership of many of our leaders, especially our governor. At the same time, the toll that the pandemic was taking on the emotional health of our children was on the minds of many in our meeting. Our Religious Education Committee set up and hosted weekly First Day meetings. All of the children were invited each week to a virtual check-in on First Days, allowing children to stay in touch with each other. Individual families did outside visits with each other. This became a real joy for many of us. They also arranged a

socially distanced picnic at the Meetinghouse to follow one of the First Days that we met on the lawn for worship.

Maintaining traditions has proven to be important, perhaps especially for our youth. We were able to continue our annual Simple Christmas by making up and delivering kits to those wanting to participate and scheduling Zoom meeting time to work together on the projects. We were also able to have our Nativity Play on Zoom. We enjoyed singing together during this, mostly with us all on mute. In this way we were able to continue providing the long-lasting connection between the adults and children in Meeting that has developed over the years. As the holidays approached the younger families put together stockings and packages for those in Meeting who would be alone at this special time. They were delivered with some carol singing at a safe distance.

Our members have lost parents, other family members and friends due to COVID. We have been cautious. Our Meeting for Worship has been virtual since March but has about 20 attendees who meet weekly. Friendships have been maintained and the depth of our friendships has been revealed. With time on our hands relationships have been developed and maintained, but some opportunities have been missed. Some of us have felt overwhelmed to varying degrees. Through understanding, caring, and kindness we have grown stronger. We have learned some ways to work through some of our differences and challenges. Our worship has grown deeper as we have come together to help each other through this very scary and trying time.