

Asheville Friends Meeting State of the Meeting - 2021

The year began with the shock of the violent assault on the capitol. Through the year our country experienced progressive polarization as our interpretation of the significance of January 6 steadily emerged. Police violence against people of color and violence in general continued unabated. Our city and county have provided enticements and accommodations for an enormous new Raytheon plant producing jet fighter engines despite protests and other push-backs.

It is impossible to reflect back on 2021 without viewing the year through the lens of the pandemic with its traumas and opportunities. Many of us felt relief at finally receiving our initial two vaccinations by spring, and were hopeful that we would soon experience some degree of normalcy. Through the spring as vaccination rates steadily increased, infection rates were improving. Many of us were wanting to again experience in-person Meeting for Worship. We proceeded with a plan in June for a hybrid model of virtual and outdoor meeting with face coverings, at first on the lawn, and later on the porch. Our attendance of members and visitors grew steadily. In September, we opened the Meetinghouse for indoor worship, but most were more comfortable meeting on the porch, or remaining virtual.

Reduced COVID-19 incidence and deaths were followed by new variants that brought new challenges. Business and government attempts to implement mandates of public health measures resulted in endless litigation up to the Supreme Court. Infection rates skyrocketed, and out of concern for the safety of our more vulnerable attenders we had to abandon plans to resume indoor meetings in the Winter months.

Our families have been handling the stress of isolation, illness, care-giving, and recovery. Some of our children were suffering from Zoom fatigue. Some of the kids and the adults do not feel that they learn or communicate well on Zoom. First Day virtual check-ins which had been occurring since March 2020, have allowed for some pain and frustration to be talked about. Statements such as “everyone’s bandwidth is so limited” and “not much flexibility to bounce” revealed the fragility of some of our families and children now. We have made mistakes in addressing the space for First Day attendees, our children, safety concerns of members being in close proximity to unvaccinated children, and making sure our young parents had their spiritual needs met. We eventually offered in-person First Day School, with some children not vaccinated, in the back of the meeting house. This allowed the children to be free to make noise and to better social distance from meetings on the front porch. Getting this right has been very humbling. As a Friend pointed out: being in a relationship, in part, is always facing the possibility of being wrong.

Our Meeting has often been silent, waiting on Spirit, during our Meetings for Worship. We have found stronger vocal ministry sharing Joys and Concerns, which has provided many of us with a sense of connection and fed our hunger for community. Our Meetings for Worship With Attention to Business have been well attended and have felt productive.

We have gained some new active regular attendees. A returning member transferred back from a nearby meeting. We gained another member who was raised in our meeting and now in his 20’s accepted our invitation to join our meeting. We unexpectedly lost a beloved member, Pat Campbell, former Clerk of Lake Erie Yearly Meeting, and our clerk of Finance. Pat’s tribute was brought to SAYMA remembrances. In September we held a memorial for the mother of a meeting member on the front porch and this felt like a Spirit-led event. One of our elderly attenders died in September, but we only recently held a memorial for her.

We have continued to have several unfilled committee positions, committees that do not meet, and committees without clerks. Some members have stepped back to take care of themselves. In some of our committees that continued to meet, it has felt less imperative to get things done. There seems to be less focus on accomplishments. Ironically, committees have accomplished a great deal. There seems to be more focus on relationships and successful interactions. Thus, it has been a good year for our Meeting, in some ways.

We have continued to work on racial justice in our Meeting and our community. Our Meeting has been fortunate to have gained a Person of Color who is a local racial justice activist. She has become a regular attendee of our Meeting for Worship and joined our racial justice book group. She has brought to us many ideas to mobilize and support the Black community in Asheville. The Tuesday racial justice discussion group finished reading *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem, and listened to, and discussed the "Seeing White" podcast. We are learning more about seeking awareness of our bodies being settled and when we are triggered. We can use this in our anti-racism work. As one Friend remarked, we are wrestling with racism and not each other. We are realizing that there is a wide range of how people feel safe, which it turns out is a pretty wide space. We are learning to trust each other's decisions and what they know about their capacity. We are finding that stepping away from judgment, is leading us to understanding one another. The Atlanta racial justice work was brought to us during the virtual SAYMA Annual Sessions and Retreat, which was very helpful and inspiring for many of us.

In an effort to address our relationship with Cherokee people and with consultation from Cherokee historian Watson Harlan we reflected, discerned and wrote our Land Acknowledgment (LA). In it, we acknowledge ,with respect, the Cherokee who have cared for the land. We recognize this statement as a first step to listen & learn from them and we affirm our work together to ensure a strong relationship. We accept responsibility to commit efforts and resources to the health and priorities of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). We're grateful to have read our LA at an EBCI Tribal Council meeting where it was accepted after a couple of comments.

In following up on our commitment, we collected donations to cosponsor UNCA Cherokee speakers. Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle, author of the novel, *Even As We Breathe*, is the first enrolled member of the EBCI to have a novel published. Her novel also won the prestigious Thomas Wolfe Literary Award. Clint Carroll is an ethnobotanist from Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma who works on issues of land conservation and the perpetuation of land-based knowledge and ways of life. Our donations exceeded the needed funding so the excess provided gifts to 2 Cherokee UNCA graduates. We planned and promoted two second-hour virtual programs that attracted several Quaker meetings and other faith groups. Dr. Ben Steere, Anthropology professor at Western Carolina University presented "The Cherokee Ancestral Land" and Cherokee historian, Watson Harlan presented "Cherokee Spiritual, Religious and Cultural Practices." We look forward to continued collaboration with our Indigenous neighbors.

We began our year with our outreach budget at a lower level than we desired. Our Peace and Earth Committee struggled to decide how to disburse the greatly reduced outreach funds. They came up with a solution that did not eliminate any of the local organizations or Quaker organizations that had struggled through the pandemic. By the end of the year, we brought in enough contributions to restore our outreach to our original levels. Our Communications Committee has kept us informed and connected through our weekly online Digest. We formed a new Ad Hoc committee to create our Meeting Handbook and to organize our Meetinghouse files. Our House and Grounds committee organized installation of new windows for the entire meeting house, stripping and painting an upstairs

First Day room, and addressed termite treatment.

We have been able to continue our inter-generational activities such as Secret Pals and Simple Christmas craft making via Zoom. These meeting traditions brought us together at a much needed time. In another virtual meeting we held a very funny Nativity play and sang Christmas carols which was a joy for us. In February our youth organized and held a nonperishable food collection and raised money for food pantries in our area. We continued to write cards and visit Friends, but again in this second year of the pandemic, we have painfully missed opportunities.

In December we held a farewell party for a much loved member of our community who was moving to the West Coast to be closer to her family. We were masked and socially distanced on the meeting house lawn. One friend remarked how surprised and joyful it was to realize after several minutes of conversation, just who she was talking to, the mask and the new hairstyle having made that a challenge. The year has been very hard, but Spirit seems to have given us gifts of being surprised by joy along the way.