

Asheville Friends Meeting 2023 State of the Meeting Report

We're grateful for this opportunity to consider and reflect on the year 2023 at Asheville Friends Meeting. It's exciting to be part of a vibrant community that strives to be generous and caring, to nourish our spirituality, and to deepen our connection to the Divine.

We'll begin with the query of What did we hold or carry this past year?

We continued to include a time to share joys and concerns at the end of each Meeting for Worship. This helped us to be aware of events that impacted attendees, and celebration and sorrow in the individual lives within our community. We provided care for community members with meals for the sick and assistance with memorial services. In two cases, the wife and partner were not involved in the life of the meeting except by proxy. But we responded, and that was the important part. Our care meant a lot to these families and gave us a way to be of service.

We carried the responsibility of being citizens of the United States. We continued to learn how we arm the world's wars. We carried distress over Congressional dysfunction and the erosion of peace-building efforts championed by FCNL. We learned about and shared our concern for environmental degradation and for the climate catastrophe.

We continued to hold great concern for the war in Ukraine. Early in 2023, we felt led to schedule a second worship-sharing session for us to labor with the tension between honoring our Peace Testimony and supporting Ukraine's sovereignty, the first having taken place in the Fall of 2022. There are no easy answers and we continue to struggle with this issue. We found solace in recognizing that others share the same response and tension with a situation that isn't black and white.

We held the Hamas attack and the Israeli War on Palestinians in our hearts. We approved a Minute calling for humanitarian aid to Gaza and a cease fire which we shared with our Congressional leaders and the Asheville Citizen's Times newspaper.

We held our efforts in building relations with people of the global majority in the Light. We carried a concern for Social Justice and sought to understand how we can get involved with reparations and what our role in reparations would look like. We traveled further toward racial justice by beginning a practice of reparations and by nurturing relationships with the local African American community. We carried hope for the continuing participation of some individual members with the SAYMA Racial Transformation affinity groups and training.

We gave attention to our responsibility for the stealing of Indigenous land by our ancestors. Each week at the rise of Meeting we hear our land acknowledgement read, It helped to keep us focused on reparations for indigenous peoples and on growing our relationship with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

We held hope for our budding youth group to continue growing and made steps toward their success. We had two teens participating in Southern Appalachian Young Friends (SAYF). We continued working toward a new playground for our children so they will feel more at home while they play and

build relationships with each other at Meeting. A concern about the Meeting's liability with the playground led us to seek advice from an attorney. We made plans to add a sign to our property with some guidelines for playground use. Concern about our process regarding playground liability helped us clarify how to provide a better outdoor space for the children.

During these discussions, we learned that one family didn't feel supported. We were also saddened to have a request from a couple who had been members for many years to be released from membership because they felt we were more liable without a fence around the playground. This couple carries tensions and pain from past unresolved issues that go back several years so we tried to discern all the underlying issues. We still have work to do to ensure everyone among us feels included.

Our Meeting heartily endorsed Scotty Utz's leading and active involvement in the gun violence prevention movement and we carried this work in our hearts. We co-sponsored a Gun Safe Surrender event with two other faith communities and got 19 guns dismantled and transformed into garden tools. Scotty founded a RAWtools chapter, RAWtools South, in Asheville and expanded his transforming work of forging guns into garden tools and art. Scotty and his partner Elizabeth Davis presented a program with the children using plastic guns. They took them apart and made new cool stuff. He talked about real guns, but they actually changed play guns into something else.

We grappled with these comments from one Friend:

“The meeting is a very comfortable place for members of the meeting. It's somewhat comfortable and somewhat uncomfortable for me. I hate when we use contrived language, NOT SIMPLE language. Examples include “1st day” rather than Sunday, quibbling over grammar and terms like Uncolonized or Decolonized, and in so doing, keep our hearts hidden from each other.”

“Rules about the meeting house are unspoken and only written down on a clipboard, but when I ask to standardize and make duties clear, I am dismissed. I like to sing but when I sing the same songs from my Quaker schools, I am told [that's not a Quaker hymn] and nobody is willing to learn a new song”.

“People are attracted and intrigued by our silence and openness. We provide an easy avenue to the mystical connections between human livelihood and the soul. But our practice is confined and restricts any practice outside what has already been practiced. I think we need to welcome in the kind of radicals and strange folk that made up the first Friends, the ones who got locked up for speaking their minds and refusing to swear on the Bible, the kinds who were greasy and unwashed and had holes in their clothing. There are lots of people who need us, but our spiritual practice is not strong enough to meet them”.

We continue to address his concerns and acknowledge that we don't do some things any more like dressing in gray, doffing or tipping hats, not doffing hats because they're no longer relevant. These statements remind us that our ways of doing things are based on reasons other than "that's the way Quakers do it."

How has our meeting embraced the Light and in so doing how have we been changed?

Our hybrid Meeting for Worship allowed those who attend virtually and those present in person to worship in silence together, despite distance or mobility challenges. In-person worshippers began sitting in a large circle around the room so everyone could see and hear the people on Zoom and they could hear and see those in the room. We asked those led to speak to step up to the microphone so those attending virtually could hear what was being said, and this seemed to help everyone in the Meeting feel closer. We began to have more people attending, both in person and on Zoom.

We embraced the Light by the work of our committees and by acting on our concerns. Some of our committees were challenged by a lack of members to attend meetings and fulfill the committees' charge. Some committees did not have clerks, which presented its own challenges. We were able to meet these challenges for the most part and nurture, proceed in, and testify to the life of the Spirit. We had strong clerking from the bench.

Our racial justice work in 2023 was deeply connected to our testimonies of integrity and equality/equity, and the Meeting's support of this work reflected positively on our testimony of community. These strong and positive connections to our testimonies were conducive to the deepening of our community's spiritual life. The Meeting as a whole became more aware of and in touch with different communities. Studying colonialism, white privilege and fragility made us more aware of the systemic nature of racism and led to our consideration of how we as individuals and as a Meeting need to respond. We continued our weekly racial justice discussion group that is morphing into a year-long study of truth and reconciliation facilitated by Dr. Melchor Hall, as we prepare to write an apology statement to the Asheville Black community. Melchor offered ten queries about charity and justice that led to a good amount of deep, fruitful heart-work.

The focus of our Tuesday night discussions changed from study and sharing about anti-Black racism to support of Ms. Bettie Council's Zig Zag Zoom initiative, providing service and support at Black-focused community festivals. It uplifted and supported not only Ms. Bettie, but all of us in the Tuesday discussions. All of us who were on the ground interacting with vendors and attendees became more deeply connected with the Black community in a relational personal way.

A huge milestone for our Meeting was our agreement to disburse all but \$1,500.00 of our Reparations Fund to the Reparations Stakeholder Authority of Asheville (RSAA) each year. We had well-attended forums on the Reparations movement here in Asheville and on the RSAA, resulting in a firmer sense of support for Reparative Justice from the Meeting as a whole. Our unity in Meeting for Business reflects work we've been doing for almost a decade.

We had a lot of connections with Asheville's Racial Justice Coalition (RJC) as well. Some of us are Committee Watchers and report back to the Coalition with an equity lens on what happened. One

Friend attended Buncombe County Health and Human Services Board Meetings, and so had access to the public health statement from the Board regarding reproductive health. We used this document in our response to FCNL's queries on reproductive healthcare, the relevancy of our Quaker values and testimonies to the issue of abortion, and the question of developing FCNL's Policy statement on abortion and reproductive health.

We as individuals and as a Meeting pledged our support for the "Reparations are Due" campaign meaning we supported and advocated for the recommendations coming from the Asheville-Buncombe Community Reparations Commission. The RJC sends out weekly recommended actions such as writing to the City Council and/or Buncombe County Commission and many of us strive to do what they ask. One Friend attends the Health and Wellness Impact Focus Areas of the Commission and reports back to the RJC.

We devoted a second hour to learning about language equity or indigenous and Latina people in our area from Indigenous Ma Hñakihu presenters, with a simultaneous English language interpreter, widening our awareness of other marginalized groups.

Our Meeting donated money and time to local and global support organizations. Peace & Earth facilitated the clarification and publication of the Meeting's positions on critical topics, such as the climate catastrophe. We continued our Fifth-Sunday postcard writing which included the following topics: ending transfers of cluster munitions; urging rejection of a bill to roll back foundational environmental laws and regulations; and supporting Palestinian sovereignty. To bring some clarity to the Palestinian crisis, we placed in our December Minutes the retirement letter of Craig Mokhiber, the UN Director of the New York Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a scathing indictment of Israel's assault on Gaza and Western complicity in Israel's 75-year-long occupation of Palestinian homeland and oppression of Palestinian people. The Committee devoted much time and energy in discerning how to distribute our General and Quaker outreach Funds.

A lot of organizations and groups now have a Land Acknowledgement, but if we just read a statement and don't do anything else, we're not real allies with our Native neighbors. Meeting approved a Minute of Support for indigenous peoples written by Peace & Earth members using Pendle Hill's model minute as a template. A Friend helped organize a daylong conference called Beyond Land Acknowledgement: Towards Reparations and Healing. In consultation with Cherokees, the conference brought six Cherokee speakers and three musicians to help us learn about Cherokee history, trauma, and healing. Eight other area Faith Groups, two UNCA Departments and the ACLU joined us in co-sponsoring this conference. In addition to substantial financial support, many of us at Meeting gave time and energy to attend this conference. It was very uplifting and built connections to form an ongoing Alliance rather than just a one-time event.

The tremendous amount of research about the role of Quakers in the Indian boarding schools led to greater humility as we increasingly recognized the connection between Quaker involvement in the boarding schools and Quaker participation in slavery. As we recognize, acknowledge, and embrace these truths to move toward reconciliation and healing, we are beginning to feel what Vanessa Julye referred to as "radical transformation."

While much of our activity centered around an emphasis on racial equity and justice, other commitments found expression in the activities and engagement of the children's programs, an active Junior Business Meeting, and Young Adult Friends. Our Meeting Library and our weekly email news digest helped keep us informed of activities and concerns. Spiritual enrichment programs and activities in the wider community brought us more into alignment with our priorities.

Our finance committee keeps us well informed of our financial health. Our Board meets once a year as required but a lot of communication can be accomplished by email. Our Assistant Treasurer, an accountant who had relocated to Brazil, continued his faithful work in putting out reader-friendly reports.

The Meeting worked on becoming welcoming to all, acknowledging that maintaining the status quo may seem easier but is not the best choice. When new people join us, even briefly, we are challenged to grow and change in response to them. We found FGC's Weaving a Wider Welcome a helpful resource as we explored how we can be more welcoming. Our meeting continued to open our hearts and minds to Spirit's leading in learning and understanding how to be more welcoming to people of the global majority. We felt enriched and more connected by this work.

We were blessed by an influx of young adults who quickly became involved in the life of the Meeting, and the insights and valuable perspectives of these new younger spiritually-committed folks enriched it. Their presence brought an energy into our meeting room, and it's impressive that even though a lot of them are either in school or working, they still gave so much to Meeting with what little free time they had. They get together frequently for shared meals and other activities, and are welcoming to new arrivals.

We also continued to have a strong group of children in the Meeting. While attendance did fluctuate from week to week, we had as many as 17 children attending First day school. They explored an expanded version of the Quaker testimonies: simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality/equity, stewardship, justice and mercy also known as "SPICES and JAM."

Our Junior Business Meeting met quarterly and led the full Meeting in service projects and other community concerns. Children involved the adults in the Meeting as they organized things such as warming packs for people living on the streets. We were moved to experience our children embracing the Light and fully contributing to the life of the Meeting. If we adults were suddenly not there, we have faith that our children would do much the same.

We're in awe of the confidence that our children exhibit in their interactions with the adults. Our children are learning that their voice is important thanks to the leadership of religious education workers and community members. We are blessed with amazing First Day School workers, and we adults benefit greatly from our work with the children. Our intergenerational events, such as Secret Pals, simple Christmas craft day, and our nativity play brings us together for fun and connection-building. We relished how sweetly the lessons with the children upstairs flowed beautifully with adult programs downstairs. Young Friends joined with adults for shared meals and during the interval between Meeting for Worship and Second Hour activities. It was always a joy-filled occasion.

What holds us together and helps us avoid becoming overwhelmed by the brokenness of the world.

We held to the basic beliefs that there is that of God in each of us and that by listening to the voice of that Spirit we are led to understand what is ours to do. We united in support of one another and stood up for and spoke out about the brokenness. Sharing our awareness of and concern for the brokenness of the world helped us feel less overwhelmed. Clarifying our positions on important issues helped us concentrate on key values. Our second hour programs led us to consider it vital to better understanding and to take needed actions. Taking time to listen brought solace and some understanding of situations in various parts of the world that were disturbing to all of us. We began each Ministry and Counsel meeting with silent worship where we held the Meeting in the Light. We touched base with those who had personal struggles.

We found good communication to be an important aspect of not becoming overwhelmed. Getting a high-speed internet connection stabilized our zoom connection, helping us see and hear each other better and keeping remote Friends more connected. Our weekly online Digest played an important role in keeping us connected by providing a forum for sharing of activities in our Meeting and our wider communities.

Our COVID masking policy was an important tool in maintaining our connection as the pandemic lingers. Through discussion and discernment we set our criteria, and faithfully followed them. For the most part folks felt safe, however there were some who felt they needed to stay home when we were mask-optional. We need to continuously revisit our masking policies to be sure we are responsive to the needs of our Meeting community.

We felt powerfully embraced by the Light when we worked with a member during his transition from this life. For weeks and weeks, we visited with him at Hospice and sat with him and his partner at their home. One Friend played her hammered dulcimer for him in his last days. After his transition, we hosted his memorial which was held at our Meetinghouse. We were grateful to have been able to participate with his loved ones in such an intimate and spiritual way.

In worship, we were faithful to expectant waiting and shared our awareness of how Spirit worked in our lives. Our worship hour was consistently deep, often entirely silent, and when messages were shared they were grounded in spirit. When there were no messages spoken, we felt the Presence pervade our gathered silence. Some folks continued attending even after moving away because they wanted to maintain their connection to the compassion, interest, and love they felt in our community. Sometimes it's the quiet people in our Meeting who, when they did speak, said something really profound, not necessarily addressing a particular subject but conveying their overall sense of a problem in the wider world or within Meeting, often leaving us feeling uplifted and challenged.

We can't solve all the problems of the world, but we can follow our own leadings, support each other, help each other out when we need a helping hand occasionally, and discern what we need to do as a community. Working locally with some of the issues helped us see some progress, even when we couldn't see it in larger arenas. We lift up all the work that members of the Meeting community do, not just for committees, but everywhere.

As we've reflected on these queries, we're humbled and grateful for all the experiences that were part of our journey in 2023. We nourished our Spirituality by recognizing that every human being is interdependent with every other human being, and with the earth itself, that planting seeds of love can

bring reconciliation to heal the world but not at anybody else's expense. Maybe that's another reason why we're called Friends.

Thanks again for your help. Take care.