

## State College Friends Meeting

### Spiritual State of the Meeting, March 2022

Since State College Friends Meeting is affiliated with both Baltimore and Philadelphia Yearly Meetings, we took the liberty of combining each yearly meeting's suggested queries for our annual Spiritual State of the Meeting report, so that we could send one report to both yearly meetings. We held two called meetings, one in person and one on Zoom, so that members and attenders could give input.

In these meetings we asked Friends to respond to the following queries:

1. Talk about the joys and sorrows that your meeting has experienced this year. What do you value about State College Friends Meeting and where would you like to see changes?
2. What wisdom and tools might your meeting share with other meetings about how the Spirit has guided your response to the pandemic? What have been the challenges?
3. What wisdom and tools might your meeting share with other meetings about how the Spirit has guided your discussions on racism and climate change? What have been the challenges?

#### **Query #1A. Talk about the joys that your meeting has experienced this year.**

Many of the joys expressed by Friends focused on community.

1. The very existence of Meeting provides opportunities to appreciate the silence and share joys and sorrows.
2. Spiritual friendship circles, in person when possible and on Zoom, have been a great source of support and comfort.
3. Friends appreciate the diversity of perspectives in meeting and the respect shown for these differences.
4. Friends appreciate the generosity of the meeting during difficult times and the resilience of meeting.

#### Religious Education

Parents expressed joy that their children were thriving in First Day School, and were grateful to the RE coordinator and committee for the extra effort in coping with the pandemic.

#### Activism, outreach, and special events

1. Friends are grateful for the work of the racial justice and climate justice working groups, and the ability to look into these issues as a group.
2. Friends appreciated events such as the hybrid candlelight service in the holiday season and the meeting picnic in the summer.
3. Gratitude was expressed for those taking the direct approach to involve busy members and attenders in the work of the meeting.

## **1B. Talk about the sorrows that your meeting has experienced this year.**

Many of the sorrows involved conditions related to the pandemic. Friends have missed social time after meeting for worship (which has now been restored), and miss those who have not attended during the pandemic.

Concerns were expressed about spiritual support.

1. Friends expressed concern about the difficulty of communicating among the wide array of spiritual perspectives so that those perspectives don't cancel each other.
2. Some Friends felt that meeting might fall short in attending the spiritual lives of the members and might not teach enough about Quakerism.
3. We might be focusing too much on concrete needs of the meeting and neglecting spiritual aspects.
4. There was a concern regarding activism that comes from wanting to do good in the world rather than on being spirit led.

Some issues were identified related to the ways in which we carry out the work of the meeting.

1. At times meetings follows the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law.
2. Difficulty with having too few members of the nominating committee
3. Unbalanced distribution of meeting's workload

## **1C. Talk about your hopes**

In general, Friends seemed to be optimistic about our ability to face challenges and take advantage of opportunities.

More spiritual support and a more welcoming environment

1. We need to overcome the challenge to bring the Quaker model to others, especially to those who have not had great experiences in organized religion.
2. Friends want to find fun ways to be together, ways that foster fellowship and provide more opportunities to experience rest from busy work.
3. A Friend expressed that an open minded environment would make younger friends feel invited
4. Maybe it's time to offer Quakerism 101 again.

Work of the meeting

1. Friends would like to see a redefinition of what the work of the meeting is.
2. Friends hope to be able to find unity on a concrete action and work towards it. Finding a center would draw us together.
3. We hope to find a way to get more people involved to distribute the work of the meeting more evenly and benefit from more thoughts and ideas.

**Query #2. What wisdom and tools might your meeting share with other meetings about how the Spirit has guided your response to the pandemic? What have been the challenges?**

At the beginning of the pandemic we closed the meetinghouse and relied on PYM's Upper Susquehanna Quarter for Zoom meetings for worship. While this allowed some Friends to develop relationships within the quarter that hadn't existed before, Friends longed for the connection with State College Friends. A safety plan was implemented and air purifiers and hand sanitizing stations were purchased, allowing a limited number of Friends wearing masks to gather in the meetinghouse. The plan was amended as numbers of COVID cases changed. As soon as the weather allowed it, several Friends began to meet outdoors. Throughout the summer that number grew, and by the end of the season we would often have more than twenty Friends worshipping on the lawn. We started our own Zoom meeting for worship, too, and varying numbers of Friends made this their primary "place" of worship. Religious Education for Young Friends continued on Zoom, and in person when the weather allowed outdoor gathering.

Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business moved to Zoom, as did religious education and most committees. Some committees met outdoors when weather permitted.

In the summer of 2021 we purchased a meeting owl, allowing the Zoom meeting and the in-person meeting to worship together. We had several hybrid business meetings after the purchase of the meeting owl, with varying levels of success; some committees also used the owl to meet in hybrid format.

Throughout the pandemic, we ceased renting space to outside groups.

Just before the start of the pandemic, we launched several spiritual friendship circles, groups of up to eight Friends gathering for fellowship and worship sharing or discussion.

Adult RE provided monthly Zoom programs.

Spiritually, these adaptations had varying effects on the meeting. Some of the comments expressed during the called meetings to discuss the spiritual state of the meeting included:

1. The meeting owl has been welcomed by most Friends, but not all.
  - a. Advantages include the ability to include Friends who have moved out of the area and continued access for those who are physically unable to attend or uncomfortable attending in person because of the pandemic. Those living outside of town expressed appreciation for being able to join from home, especially in inclement weather.
  - b. Some Friends, however, are uncomfortable with the presence of technology in worship. Reasons for this discomfort included Zoom fatigue, discomfort with the TV in the middle of the room (it has since been moved off to the side to try to accommodate this discomfort), and unwillingness to appear on camera.

- c. The use of the meeting owl allowed a larger number of people to gather for a memorial service and for adult religious education programs than would have been possible otherwise, especially given the restricted number of people permitted in the meeting room during the pandemic.
2. The use of all-Zoom formatting has also been a mixed blessing.
  - a. Some committees have found Zoom preferable for evening meetings, particularly in winter.
  - b. Many Friends expressed appreciation for the friendship circles, both those established by the Adult RE Committee and several which formed independently. This has also allowed several distant Friends to participate.
  - c. Several Friends appreciated the increased access to quarterly and yearly meetings, and to other entities such as FGC.
  - d. A Friend commented that differing views on the use of technology reminded them that not all Friends have the same needs and preferences. Zoom works well for some but is a burden to others. Concern was expressed that this could drive Friends apart if not handled with tenderness.
  - e. Some Friends find it hard to connect in worship through a computer screen; one Friend commented that it was easier for her to connect on Zoom than in person.
  - f. There is a learning curve with using Zoom with Quaker process; it can be difficult to read the sense of the meeting when not all Friends are on screen, and those who are don't show as much body language as they do in person.
3. Maintaining connections has been a challenge, but there have been some successes.
  - a. Many Friends commented that spiritual friendship circles have been very helpful. We have also been able to include several distant Friends in these groups.
  - b. The first summer of the pandemic, meeting for worship was held on the lawn, which many Friends enjoyed. The second summer, some Friends met in person or on Zoom in the meeting room, and some outdoors. While this met a diversity of needs, some Friends lamented the division of the community.
  - c. An all-meeting picnic in summer 2021 at a local park was a very welcome opportunity to gather and reconnect.
  - d. As COVID numbers decline, we plan to re-institute social hour after meeting for worship. When weather permits, we will gather outdoors for social time. Friends

have deeply missed this opportunity to connect with one another and to welcome visitors.

4. Other opportunities and challenges have arisen.
  - a. There was disunity in the community regarding restrictions for those attending a memorial service, especially around use of the kitchen and social room for a meal after the service. We had discontinued use of the kitchen during the pandemic, and asked that everyone present be masked. (We did end up allowing the meal to take place, as everyone in attendance was vaccinated.)
  - b. A Friend shared that she was able to become more involved with meeting during the pandemic because of working from home.
  - c. The pandemic has brought out frustrations that some Friends already had with meeting, providing both a challenge and an opportunity to address these issues.
  - d. Some Friends were distressed when the meeting house was closed at the beginning of the pandemic, and were vastly relieved when we were able to open it again – first restricting attendance to ten Friends, then gradually increasing the number as we learned more about the pandemic and the COVID numbers changed.
  - e. Financially we were able to maintain a strong level of donations, though we lost income through the lack of rentals to outside groups.

Our Religious Education coordinator submitted these comments about how RE adapted to the pandemic:

At the beginning of the pandemic Religious Education went to zoom within a few weeks after the school district started delivering school by zoom. We found this very challenging at the elementary level, so we started adding activities to the lessons so the children had something to do with their hands while we read a story. Quaker stories geared toward the elementary level on Youtube video were very helpful to our lessons as the videos seemed more compelling to the children than read-alouds coming through the screen. Parents found they had to supervise their children a lot, and had to come up with basic supplies such as markers and paper for the activities. At both the elementary and secondary level we lost some students who were completely zoomed out by being at home in front of screens all day all week.

By the fall of that first year, we, the teachers, provided a bin of supplies for children, K-5, to use at home, and weekly delivered special supplies to children's homes. Though we talked while socially distanced at their homes, parents really appreciated the effort to get their children engaged and it was great to get a glimpse of the kids in person! The parents were still supervising but at least the children were much more engaged and wanting to do the activities. The middle school (MS) and high school (HS) groups continued to meet on zoom most weeks.

This year we made the decision to have children meet in person, masked and socially distanced, in order to develop the sense of community we have all been missing. Both the MS/HS group

and elementary group met for September and October outside, but when the weather forced us inside in November families in the younger group wanted the children to continue to meet in person, while the MS/HS group went back to zoom. This has continued though we plan to have the MS/HS group attend in person again starting March 20 as the covid risk has lowered and students have been engaging in community activities more.

In some ways zoom made regular attendance at First Day School more possible. The family could finish their breakfasts while students got onto their zoomed lessons. The families of younger students may have felt almost obliged to attend on Sunday after we had dropped supplies at their houses! And the MS/HSers were simply more adept at transitioning to zoom where you really could see everyone's faces at once, and the rule of one person speaking at a time, was necessitated by the remote format. The one real virtue of zoom lessons was discovering that we could have speakers with disabilities or from different countries join us on zoom to share their gifts and leadings. These were very exciting lessons.

For most of our families, the students have better attendance now than they did before the pandemic. People are not spending weekends away as much and students know one another better so they are more drawn to attending. Though we would never wish for a pandemic, our first day school program has weathered this storm well, taking advantage of some changes necessitated by covid and making work-arounds for the disadvantages. Students, parents and teachers have been awesome and they deserve our kudos!

**Query # 3 What wisdom and tools might your meeting share with other meetings about how the Spirit has guided your discussions on racism and climate change?**

We have a Racial Justice Working Group (RJWG) and a Climate Justice Working Group (CJWG), both of which were formed shortly before the onset of the pandemic.

1. Before undertaking to educate other Friends, RJWG educated themselves with books, videos, and podcasts in an effort to recognize that "We" are part of the problem.
2. The RJWG identified a need to make connections with people of color when possible.
3. The RJWG did a wonderful job running educational workshops. Their practice of contacting individual Friends to invite them to the workshops was especially effective
4. Friends appreciate getting an education on racism and climate change
5. The community of Friends active in these groups is smaller at the moment but has grown stronger during this time.
6. CJWG keeps challenging the Meeting to take steps to reduce our carbon footprint with the meeting house and grounds.
7. A Friend expressed the belief that there is a dynamic connection between activism and spirituality. Our spirits lead us into action and from that action we are led back to our spiritual lives for nurture and grounding and guidance.
8. A Friend felt hope during a Racial Justice presentation because two individuals were "holding space."

9. A Friend sees individuals having a way to communicate with nature and that reassures her with CJWG.

### **What have been the challenges?**

1. CJWG is active, but they are having a harder time getting more people involved.
2. It is wonderful that those who are led can put their energies into these issues. Some worry that we are neglecting other concerns and focusing only on racism and climate change.
3. A Friend wants to hear stories about how people are confronting these issues. Perhaps the working groups could put these on audio files that people could listen to.
4. A member of the CJWG wonders what Friends want from the group.
5. A member of Racial Justice group expressed the wish that there was some small action that we could do together as a meeting. -Concern that we are focusing too much attention on external issues.
6. CJWG published a newsletter for a year. While readers expressed appreciation, they were few in number, and the committee decided to look for other ways to achieve their goals of education and inspiration.