

## STATE OF THE MEETING REPORT FOR 2020

Atlanta Friends Meeting

Lissa Place, Clerk

approved at Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business on March 21, 2021

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Atlanta Friends Meeting continues to be a supportive spiritual community in the midst of a global pandemic and renewed calls for racial justice. We have struggled and we have soared, but in the end we have done the best we could to carry on in 2020. We are working with the challenges of present conditions to care for our members and attenders, finding new ways to support Friends, to pull together as a community, and to continue our mission to be a welcoming spiritual home for all.

Our work to forward Quaker ideals looked different under these circumstances. We could not have casual conversations during coffee hour, and that has affected the ways that many committees function. Our office coordinator worked with committees to help them get information to the community, using the announcement sheet and newsletter, website and Facebook group, and our Meeting's Listserv and emails to communicate. We improved in our ability to use technology as a Meeting, which will benefit us beyond COVID, and created an environment where the whole Meeting worked in unity while we were all dealing with similar challenges created by COVID. For this reason, this report will be more about general work in the Meeting, and less about what each committee is doing.

There are ways in which our spiritual depth brought new meaning during these trying times. We have seen each other through a mass movement for racial justice, an election and its troubling aftermath, Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, and endless ups and downs that we have all experienced during this pandemic. Messages in Meeting became an important source of support. One message spoke of this time as a "unique Sabbath." Another message spoke of the brokenness many of us feel as a place for the light to shine in. There were messages of environmental rejuvenation, and gratitude for a slower way of life, along with others of anger, frustration, isolation, and fear. We were reminded to come to Meeting however we are. This has truly been a time that we have relied on each other for our very substance, and we have been there.

We began our Sunday Meeting for Worship via Zoom on March 22. Although there are some Friends for whom technology is a deterrent, we have had an average attendance of 80 for Sunday worship. Meeting online allows us to accommodate people who are unable to attend Meeting for health reasons or distance and also provided the opportunity to worship with Friends who have moved across the globe. We cherish the opportunities that virtual worship has provided us, and we hope to find a way to permanently welcome these Friends to our worship. While marriages are on hold, we welcomed two new members, two transfers in, and four transfers of members to new spiritual homes this year. We held a hybrid (in-person and virtual) memorial Meeting for Worship celebrating the life of Woody Woodall in October, and a second virtual memorial meeting in December celebrating the life of Beth Garrettson. Sadly, due to the pandemic, we have not yet been able to hold memorial services for several other people who died during 2020: David Jarvis (d. February 12, 2020), Peter Sederberg (d. August 3, 2020), Priscilla Padron (d. September 26, 2020), and Tom Kenworthy (d. December 28, 2020). We held a forum in November to help us deal with our many and varied forms of grief. Ministry and Worship continues to work to find ways to support the community while we

meet virtually, including weekly messages that welcome newcomers to what could be perceived as a new and unusual form of worship, and offers instructions that help to deepen the quality of worship for all. They continue to hold both monthly spiritual journeys of members and attenders and Adult First Day school virtually.

To meet the spiritual needs of our young Friends, Religious Education has hosted 3-4 families meeting with elementary age students online in the 1/2 hour before worship to enjoy check in, songs, and read aloud books. The children continue their Godly Play curriculum and enjoy the opportunity to virtually "invite each other in" to their homes. Teens and young adult friends met weekly for a much appreciated discussion and fellowship. Over the year, they met with 35 youth in person, and 20 on Zoom calls. They continue to reach out to national Quaker organizations to problem solve teaching during the pandemic.

In order to deal with the volume and intensity of changes required to use the Meetinghouse safely during COVID, a new committee called the Working Group on the Use of the Meetinghouse was formed during Business Meeting in May. On the committee are two Centers for Disease Control and Prevention representatives from our Meeting, as well as the Clerks of many committees in Meeting. They have wrestled with the technicalities of what it means to be safe in a COVID world, wanting to provide opportunities for connection when people want it, while keeping ourselves and those that enter our building safe. They worked on how to handle renters as well as ways that the Meeting would use the space. Following a survey, they determined interest in having two in person midweek worship services which started in July and September.

Approximately 5-10 people have been attending each service, and found it meaningful. For worship services as well as for renters, they have determined guidelines that include sanitizing, social distancing, closing the kitchen, signing in to allow for contact tracing if needed, and wearing masks. Right now, our renters have showed little interest in returning to the Meetinghouse, but we have hosted a few small groups. The committee has come up with a protocol for what to do if someone who has been in the Meetinghouse has a positive Coronavirus test. In addition, to making the building safer, they have worked with the Administration Committee to upgrade all HVAC filters in the building to improve air quality. This committee is basically in charge of how the building is used until the time that the committee is no longer needed.

While we are having Meeting for Worship via Zoom, a new ministry at the Meetinghouse has arisen among us. Although we are not using the Meetinghouse for typical uses, it is not closed, and in some ways is carrying out our vision for peace and social justice. Anton Flores-Maisonet, our Friend in Residence, has started to use the Meetinghouse for radical hospitality for immigrants seeking asylum. He and his spouse, Charlotte Flores, have partnered with other organizations, attenders of Meeting, and even neighborhood residents to help immigrants and asylum seekers find their way from detention centers to their final destinations. In the Meetinghouse, hospitality is being offered in the form of overnight accommodations, meals, clothing, and other items necessary for travel to our guests' final destination, usually in the United States. In 2020, this ministry provided a place to stay for nearly 60 guests from 20 countries. Typically our guests need just one night's accommodations before catching a bus or plane to their home. This has been a heart-filling ministry under the guidance of Anton and Charlotte that has involved over twenty households

of the Meeting. There is so much that we are unable to do at this time that it is uplifting to hear about what is being done. We are grateful to the Floreses and all involved for this ministry.

In this critical year for racial justice, Atlanta Friends Meeting has recommitted to uprooting systemic racism and white supremacy both externally, in our communities and nation, and internally, in ourselves, and our Meeting. We have seen wider participation of AFM Friends in anti-racism work at the Meeting, committee, and individual levels. Early in the year, the Committee on Undoing Racism in Atlanta Friends Meeting (CURAFM) and Quakers for Racial Equality (QRE) co-sponsored a well-attended workshop on “Addressing Racism Among Friends.” Then they offered support to various committees for dismantling systemic racism to forward our goal of becoming a more welcoming anti-racist Meeting. This effort later led to the formation of an Ad Hoc Anti-Racist Policies and Procedure Group with representatives from several different committees to address institutional racism in AFM.

Recognizing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on People of Color, Quakers for Racial Equality reached out to Friends of Color, helped expand and publicize the Assistance Fund, donated funds to a Black church providing direct assistance to unhoused people, and supported another local group, Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights. Social Concerns Committee submitted a Minute approved by Business Meeting that encouraged legislators to focus on access to healthcare, the disparate effects of COVID on Black, Latinx, and People of Color, and the goal of a global ceasefire. In addition, the Social Concerns budget was largely used for local relief of those suffering during the pandemic.

In the wake of racist killings of Black people by police and white vigilantes, Quakers for Racial Equality, the Atlanta Friends of Color group, and the Committee on Undoing Racism in Atlanta Friends Meeting coordinated to draft a statement supporting Black Lives Matter for the AFM website and a draft AFM Anti-Racism Minute. Both were approved by Meeting For Business. CURAFM made Black Lives Matter signs available, and a great many Atlanta Friends participated in a wide range of racial justice activities with others from Meeting, as individuals, or with other groups. Within Meeting, CURAFM also started a new online opportunity to talk about race in a brave space. “Let’s Talk About Race,” met weekly from July-September, and monthly since then. Quakers for Racial Equality continued their ongoing work virtually, offering the “Listening Ear for Concerns about Racism” by phone, and a “virtual literature table” that was available through the weekly announcement sheet. QRE held monthly online meetings on a wide range of topics, such as Juneteenth and Gullah Geechee culture, Reparations, and Right Relations with Indigenous Peoples. QRE also collaborated with Social Concerns committee to celebrate the 100 th anniversary of Votes for Women with a program on African American women suffragists and civil rights workers. The Friends of Color group supported each other virtually and collaborated with various committees on anti-racism work. An AFM book group reading books by and about People of Color read 10 books during the year. Beyond our own Meeting, AFM Friends participated in online opportunities such as the Me & White Supremacy book study group organized through SAYMA, and the “Listening 4 Justice” program, which is led by AFM member Folami Prescott Adams and includes a number of AFM Friends among its participants.

Social Concerns Committee was actively involved outside the Meeting with Get Out The Vote, making and donating banners to non-partisan groups working in Black and Latinx communities where voting has historically been suppressed.

Our Meeting has continued to care for each other using virtual and socially distanced ways, primarily through the Care & Counsel committee. During March and April, Care & Counsel reached out to everyone in our directory by phone or email to offer support. They created online forms to allow Friends to volunteer with tasks such as grocery shopping as well as to request assistance. To help Friends in financial difficulty, the committee updated guidelines for the Assistance Fund and advertised how to apply for assistance in the weekly announcement sheet. As part of discerning their role in anti-racist work, they approved updated guidelines for welcoming diverse newcomers.

Administration Committee remained very active this year. They have nurtured and supported the Friend in Residence, many of the technical needs of Meeting, and have been in charge of cleaning and upgrading our building inside and out. The Administration Committee upgraded all HVAC filters in the building to improve air quality, and explored installing solar panels as well as a new roof.

The Suchitoto Fund Committee's work has come to a close this year, as planned. This Committee has been meeting since September 2016 to encourage the development of a non-profit organization of former and current scholarship recipients from the work of Frank and Carol Cummings, according to a bequest in Frank's will. The name of this organization is "Asociación de Becarios Actuales y Graduados de Educación Superior para el Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud de Suchitoto" or ABESUCHI." An international non-profit organization that works in El Salvador (IDEAS) was engaged to facilitate this work. ABESUCHI now has full legal status and is functioning as an independent organization that is now administering a funded project. The AFM Finance Committee will carry on some additional annual transfers from Frank's bequest and will monitor financial reporting from ABESUCHI now that the Suchitoto Fund Committee has been laid down.

Nominating Committee has continued to fill the spaces as they came available during this year. They were greatly affected by not seeing people in person at Meeting. They are working on creating a system that works virtually, which includes making announcements about open positions and asking for volunteers more than usual.

Our lobbying group for Friends Committee on National Legislation has learned to do virtual lobby visits. They are using this time to learn social media, and are already tweeting and posting on Facebook! They, with all of us, grieve the loss of Representative John Lewis, but look forward to meeting his successor as well as two new senators.

We had our 9th year of AFM serving as host meeting for Quaker Voluntary Service. Due to the generosity of the local Mennonite Community, the fellows are enjoying a new home in Atlanta. There were many changes in staff as well as in the Local Support Committee during 2020, but they are ending the year with solid leadership on both fronts. The support committee is striving to take up issues related to equity more intentionally and explicitly, including examining race, class, and gender. They are looking at this so that they can best be supportive of the Fellows.

Macon Worship Group, which is under our care, has been quite active during the pandemic. They have switched to virtual meetings which allowed them to give up their rental space. They have moved their worship to Thursdays to allow people to attend AFM Meetings on the weekends, and they have begun meeting weekly for a shorter period of time with the flexibility that is offered by Zoom. They are also holding monthly public education topics as well as business meetings.

Some other important events and activities for 2020 include:

- Landscape Committee: They have done a massive removal of kudzu from the property and replaced it with plants that support wildlife.
- Approving Facebook Guidelines for our Facebook Page: In October's Business Meeting, we approved guidelines to help monitor how people use the Facebook Page. In an Ad Hoc committee initiated by our office coordinator, they came up with much needed guidelines. This seemed particularly important during this time because many people are finding us online and see the Facebook Page as a representation of who we are. The moderator positions are being added to the list of Meeting positions to be filled by Nominating Committee.
- Using tools in Business Meeting: We have used colors in Business Meeting to make it easier to see the general opinion of the group since it is harder to get a "sense of the Meeting" virtually. We have used green, red, white or black objects to reflect agreement, concern, or a question/answer to a specific question. After the daunting task of setting up virtual Business Meetings, we mastered the technology and were able to keep the work of the Meeting moving forward.
- Increased use of our cabin on Lake Burton: The Ferguson Cabin was willed to the Meeting by Dwight and Irene Ferguson many years ago. There has always been a committed group of people who have loved and cared for the cabin, but they have struggled to have new people discover it. This year, a record number of people visited the cabin (even with restrictions on only having one group visit at a time), with 17 people who had never been there before. They are working on making information about how to rent the cabin even more accessible to all.

Despite the many challenges of 2020, we have persevered. We have found creative solutions for our current circumstances, and we have been there for one another. Now, more than ever we have relied on the depth of our faith to carry on. The year 2020 was like no other, but we are grateful to be on the other side of it, and hope that we will be stronger for it.