

Celo Friends Meeting State of the Meeting Report for 2020  
Approved by CFM Meeting for Business and shared with SAYMA, March 2021

Celo Friends Meeting has continued to search for ways to provide a spiritual home for our members and attenders during this year dominated by the pandemic and isolation. The reality of the situation came to us over a matter of weeks in March and April. At first it seemed like it would be enough to forgo the pre-meeting hugs and closing handshake. We quickly realized that this was not being cautious enough and suspended gathering in person. We cancelled meeting for business in March and encouraged Friends to worship in place at home on First Day. As it became clear that this was going to be a long-term reality, we began to experiment with the video conference platform Zoom. In April we held our first meeting for business via Zoom and started offering a Zoom link for First Day worship. This met the needs of some, but many Friends were not comfortable relying on technology for our worship and continued to observe an hour of worship in isolation.

As time went on the need was felt for more human interaction. Recognizing this need we helped to organize small, in person, worship groups outside at people's homes during the warm months. One group began meeting on the foundation of our old meetinghouse, taking steps to remain a small group that could maintain a safe distance. We continued to offer Zoom worship also. After several months we began to feel fragmented as a Meeting. We were all worshipping but we were missing being together. After addressing this concern at meeting for business we decided to establish one First Day each month where we would all endeavor to join the Zoom worship. This has remained our practice as we go into a new year. We also have adopted the practice of including unstructured social time on Zoom before and after the worship hour to meet the needs of Friends for fellowship.

One benefit of the Zoom worship has been the participation of Friends from afar. We have several members/attenders who live at a great distance who have been able to join us regularly. Several Celo Friends supported one of these long-distance attenders with planting a victory garden on a vacant lot in an African American neighborhood near Philadelphia. Another response to our feeling of fragmentation was to re-start our monthly newsletter, after a seven-month hiatus. This has provided another means for helping us feel more connected. Our out-of-state readers have shared their appreciation for this link to CFM.

Although our meetinghouse remains open, it has only had the occasional solitary visitor. Our caretaker faithfully keeps it clean. Other uses of our buildings have been suspended, including the Children's Garden Preschool which has switched to an all-outdoor program.

The lack of in person gathering has been especially hard on families with children. Our Zoom worship and small gatherings are not easy for children to participate in. The year started out with First Day School meeting in our usual 2 groups - childcare and elementary/middle school-aged children. Each group would average between 2-7 children. Our themes focused on Quaker SPICES and virtues. We started the practice of having the children return to the gathered Meeting at the end of worship so that we could end our time together as a

community. Our paid childcare helpers were coordinating with the adult childcare volunteers. All this changed when in-person gatherings were suspended. First Day School committee reached out to families to see how we could help, and/or how we could gather. With the stress of the pandemic, we were able to gather only twice - for Peace Day celebration in August and for outdoor Christmas tree decorating and a hike in December. Despite only meeting twice, they were meaningful gatherings focused on Peace and Community. As we enter the new year, we plan to offer more walks with the children as a way to provide some positive social interaction.

The onset of the pandemic coincided with us laboring over the issue of racial justice, and specifically how we recognize racism in ourselves and our meeting. After much prayerful consideration, we united on a minute to SAYMA with our concerns for the direction the Uplifting Racial Justice Committee had gone. We resolved to focus our energy and resources on looking at racial justice as a Meeting. An ad hoc Race Matters Committee formed and has met continuously weekly via Zoom since July. The committee used the book *White Supremacy & Me* as a resource. This committee's work was very challenging and enlightening to the members. In the new year the committee will continue their work by engaging more Celo Friends in understanding the role of racism and white supremacy both within the Society of Friends and in the wider world.

Our Adult Religious Education committee has remained active through the pandemic. The February, March, and April religious education sessions focused on the theme: How Does the Truth Prosper Among You? February's forum was on "How do we do Justice?" and March's on "How does Forgiveness prosper among you?" The April forum on humility was cancelled due to the pandemic. The committee convened a meeting with the co-clerks on March 25 to discuss support for members and attenders during this time of isolation. The result was formation of three Friendly 8s groups, which have met weekly or semi-weekly throughout the year, using a worship-sharing format, with queries developed by rotating facilitators. These groups have provided important support and community during this time of physical absence from one another.

After its usual summer hiatus, the committee reconvened in August to plan two fall programs by Zoom, focusing on the history of racial justice among NC Quakers, to give historical context for the work of the Meeting's Race Matters ad hoc Committee. The October program provided information on Quaker history of slave holding and emancipation in North Carolina. The November program presented a history of slavery in Western North Carolina including information about the graves of enslaved people in Celo Community, by Clark and Peggy Tibbits; the integration of Yancey County Schools through an NAACP lawsuit in 1960, with a chronology of Quaker and AFSC support, by Joyce Johnson; and a Gib Barrus interview about the history of Camp Celo and Arthur Morgan School around race relations and integration. Documents from this program were donated to the Oak Crest School project in Burnsville, which is archiving the history of integration in Yancey County. In the new year we will continue this theme with a panel discussion by the Race Matters committee, and other presentations to increase awareness of the prevalence of systemic racism in our society.

Nominating committee has continued its work this year by gathering, and bringing to meeting for business for approval, job and committee descriptions for all positions of responsibility within Celo Meeting. Many of these had never been formalized. Two new positions, record keeper and end-of-life liaison have been created. This work led the meeting to see the utility of having a website, which is being created by a member of the meeting. We also completed our biennial process for nominations. Most Friends were willing to continue in their current positions, but we used the Strawberry Creek process to find candidates for some jobs including co-clerk and recording clerk.

Lack of in person gatherings made our annual gathering to observe the Day of the Dead especially meaningful. Masked and keeping safe distance we cleaned up our peaceful cemetery and then spoke words to honor those no longer living, known and unknown.

Our Christmas Eve worship with carol singing was especially poignant. Since singing in unison on Zoom is not feasible, we took turns singing as family groups. Though we missed being together, it was sweet to see each other's faces and feel the intimacy of being in each other's homes.

In spite of our limitations on in person gatherings, Friends have continued to be generous with their financial support. Many Friends who don't participate regularly in worship still contribute to our general fund, the Feed-a-Child effort, and a special concerns fund that has helped out families with unexpected bills.

We are grateful for the Light that we continue to nurture, individually and corporately, as we head into another year of isolation. We look forward to being able to worship, sing, hug, laugh, and share meals together again before too long.

In the Light,

Gib Barrus Co-Clerk