

Charleston Friends Meeting State of the Meeting Report 2020

Charleston Friends Meeting has attempted to honor the spirit of this year's queries by condensing and rephrasing them so they better reflect our situation.

1. How does the Spirit fare amongst you?

2020 was a year we divide into before and after COVID. Before, Charleston Friends worshipped together physically in small quarters provided by a local service organization, as we had for many years. We continued our practice of offering a meal at a homeless shelter on Superbowl Sunday, worked with the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) on repeal of authorizations for use of military force, and minuted concern about SAYMA's processes for appointing and maintaining committees in good order. We were blessed with a visit from Arthur Morgan School students, who joined us for worship after their educational activities in Charleston.

On March 15, we held our final in-person Meeting for Worship. Later that week, the Governor issued a "stay at home" order due to the COVID pandemic. For several weeks, the American Friends Service Committee West Virginia Economic Justice Project hosted First Day Meeting for Worship on its Zoom account; at our April Meeting for Business, we decided that we needed our own account for worship and other meeting activities, as we did not expect a prompt resumption of normal life.

The immediate consequence of the COVID order was that we stopped seeing and visiting one another personally, except in small groups, wearing facemasks, and separated by 6 feet or more. The enforced separation may have made us hunger for more time together, if only virtually. Attendance at Meeting for Worship increased, as we drew participation from Friends who were traveling, those in our affiliated Greenbrier Valley Worship Group, other nearby Friends, and children of our meeting.

The organization in whose space we met sold its building over the summer, leaving us officially homeless. Finding a place to gather physically will become more important as the pandemic eases. In the meantime, we adapted our Christmas meal at the women's shelter by asking a neighborhood church to cater it, and contributed to that church's established feeding ministry. The experience may create a longer term collaboration with that church. Charleston friends also adopted a family for Christmas, providing gifts for the children and parent.

We engaged in the FCNL priorities setting process. One Friend attended the Friends General Conference Virtual Gathering, which was very successful.

After several years of wrestling with the matter, Friends transferred 38 acres of riverfront property that was donated to us several years previously to the West Virginia Land Conservancy. They will develop the site into a canoe/kayak landing for paddlers on the Elk River, to be named Quaker Landing.

Greenbrier Valley Friends organized a virtual West Virginia Fall gathering, with worship, fellowship, and workshops for regional Friends. One especially meaningful workshop described the joys and difficulties of a longstanding interracial friendship. Charleston participated fully in the COVID-constrained activities of SAYMA, with members at all four virtual Representative Meetings (except for portions of the Fall RM that conflicted with a memorable workshop during our simultaneous Fall Gathering). Several serve on SAYMA committees. We responded to inquiries from SAYMA with thoughtful minutes.

Spirit is faring well in a meeting when love and unity prevail among Friends engaged in a constant and consistent effort to discern and follow how the one Truth of the one Spirit would bind together in action the hearts of a group of diverse persons. Seen from this angle, the Spirit seems to fare middling well at CFM right now.

2. How has your meeting responded to the impact of structural racism on and within your meeting, in your community, or in the nation?

Not unexpectedly, all of our Meeting is of European descent as West Virginia is 92% identified as white. The impact of *structural* racism on the meeting itself has been slight because of the size of the meeting and its lack of significant institutional structure. We have no targeted outreach to POC or to any other identified group of people. But we constantly searching for outreach. We are now partnering with what is considered a black church for food preparation and donations to local shelters.

Members have worked as led with different racial and ethnic groups. Several members have shared readings and resources on racism in the US, making us more aware as we become more educated. Two attended a virtual workshop with Herbert Henderson Office of Minority Affairs, a WV government committee that deals specifically with local racism. Another undertook personal outreach to learn about the Paul Cuffee Abolitionist Center, and brought suggested readings on white supremacy to our meeting. Others in meeting are actively engaged with the Poor People's Campaign and supportive of Black Lives Matter, though in person participation has been limited by the COVID pandemic.

COVID has prevented us from holding worship in Booker T. Washington's church, though we have supported it as well as racial justice concerns through targeted contributions. We have missed the opportunity to worship in that sacred space, and look forward to returning when conditions permit.

One of the positive results of Charleston's profound disagreement with SAYMA over expenditure of funds by the clerk of the Uplifting Racial Justice (URJ) committee has been repurposing money withheld from SAYMA to local racial justice concerns.

SAYMA racial justice concerns and controversies have frequently been topics of discussion in our Meetings for Business. We have minuted responses to SAYMA inquiries related to URJ twice this year, and prayerfully considered how SAYMA ought to restructure its racial justice work. One Friend noted that he has “spent innumerable hours reflecting on and working with other Friends to sort out the URJ entanglement and seeking for what is in the Spirit in responding to all that.” We regret that most of this thought appears to be considered an affirmation of white privilege and structural racism and dismissed by some individuals within SAYMA. We look forward to more conciliatory conversation in the coming year.

Speaking words many of us could echo, the same Friend said of personal racial justice work that “All I have done is engage in a certain amount of reflection involving explicit recognition of the persistent presence of racism as a pattern of almost always unnoticed shadows in my life and heritage. “

3. How has your meeting adapted to the COVID environment, particularly in taking care of each other and your children and grandchildren?

The meeting uses zoom pretty well to keep in touch with how folks are doing. Friends are able to share their feelings and situations in a fairly open way. In addition to facilitating occasional participation in Meeting by members of other monthly meetings and members not able to easily travel, Zoom and related internet platforms have enabled many of us to continue some quite wonderful contact with out of town relatives through the pandemic, for which we are grateful.

To our surprise, the quality of worship was changed but not diminished. In spite of the Hollywood Square images and occasional connection issues, we have had occasions of deep sharing and worship that many felt was truly gathered. Instead of sitting in a circle, we are arrayed on a screen, and behind each person is a view of that Friend’s space: sometimes an office, a living room, or an outdoor scene. We are invited into each others’ lives.

One Friend felt “proud of how Zoom has served to hold us together and even expanded our Meeting. We have had Friends from other Meetings in West Virginia join us for First Day Meeting, and some of our grown children have joined us. Friends from Greenbrier Worship Group have joined us regularly ... bringing us in closer communion, and Friends with health issues have benefited as well.”

Another added, “While zoom may not work for everyone, the ease of gathering and developing tenderness with each others’ ways and crochets has given those of us who are regulars with our Zoom meetings a new intimacy in the sharing of perspectives. The watch word here is that ‘respect’ we have mentioned several times. There is also the effect of insights into daily life and cares that Zoom has opened up.”

We changed, but went on with activities important to the life of the meeting. Bi-weekly Bible Study concluded the book of Ruth and began reading the “Quaker

Gospel” of John. Second hour discussions, previously held after Meeting for Worship moved to alternate Wednesdays to avoid Zoom fatigue. Committees met over Zoom more frequently than in person. E-mail and telephone allowed us to organize support for Friends needing it.

Any sudden change brings gains and losses, problems and opportunities. On the whole the Meeting has not only stayed intact and continued to accomplish business as usual, but in many ways has become larger and more intimate. The Spirit can apparently work through the internet.

Approved at Meeting for Business March 7, 2021