

Chattanooga Friends Meeting, State of Society Report 2020

2020 was a difficult year around the world, in the United States, and at Chattanooga Friends. In March, the coronavirus pandemic mostly shut us down, like everyone else. Unlike some, we never completely shut our doors. From the beginning and throughout this we have kept a small in person presence at our Meeting House, masked and socially distanced. We did this for two reasons: 1) it meant that our lovely worship room, where we have faithfully worshipped together for nearly four decades, was always on our Zoom screen, keeping us grounded in its physical reality and 2) it allowed a few of our older members who are not comfortable in virtual reality to continue to worship with us. Mostly there were two to five people present there.

But we went from being a growing and thriving Meeting which was considering ways to expand our space and was working on creating the first First Day School program it had had in a decade to being a small group just struggling to keep its community alive and vital in the changed world. In 2019 we averaged 20-24 adults and four to eight children in attendance. After the pandemic really set in we had 12-14 adults present, mostly on the computer screen, and usually no children.

One of the greatest losses for us was that we lost touch with our children. We did try at times to reach out to parents and children, with limited success. Parents said that with children remote schooling, neither children nor parents were interested in more screen time for them. Perhaps we could and should have done more to stay in touch with parents and children and create more non-screen opportunities for them. We did do some, had a couple of bonfires at the Meeting House with s'mores. But it seems that we kept thinking the current state was temporary and we could just wait it out until normal came back. When things stopped in March, we had no idea that a year later we would just be starting to figure out how to rebuild.

Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting, we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence. We had to learn how to believe in and trust that this can also happen when we are gathered on line. For some of our long-standing members, this did not seem possible and they did not worship with us at all, though some kept in touch with us in other ways. Others of us were able to feel a spiritual connection through our virtual reality and to feel this as meaningful and strengthening. We all agree that it is not the complete experience of group in person worship and look forward to being face to face again and actually shaking each other's hands. With fewer people there was less vocal ministry and rarer times when people felt they were given a message that they needed to or could share in virtual reality.

There are things we have done well through this and some growing edges and things we have not done so well. We have tried, especially through the efforts of a few people with gifts in this kind of ministry, to stay in touch and comfort each other and check on each other's well-being. Check ins and personal sharing became a larger and more important part of our weekly meetings. But the people who received the most connection and contact were not always the ones who

needed it the most. Some of our committees just disappeared. Other committees have worked hard and deeply and have been a large part of what held us together through this. Ministry & Oversight continued its work of trying to discern and meet the spiritual needs of individuals and the community. They planned a variety of in person events for the community like the bonfires and outdoor worship where we could be safely together in person and on-line events like virtual potlucks where we could still break bread together, even on our computer screens. Property Committee continued its oversight and maintenance of our house and grounds quietly in the background, making sure that our home stayed in good condition while we were not there very much. And we are grateful that our members and attenders continued their donations even when they were not physically present, so that the Meeting did not suffer financially.

Peace and Social Justice Committee and the Anti-Racism Working Group that arose out of it has been one area where our Meeting has continued to learn and grow. Through the work of P&SJ committee, the Meeting wrote a minute in response to the (May, 2020) shooting of George Floyd, Chattanooga Friends Meeting Statement on Racism and Violence in Policing, which we sent as a letter to the editor of our local newspaper and sent to SAYMA. In June, we also sent a letter to our City Council requesting that they make the needs of the African American community a priority in terms of policy and budget decisions. At that time, the Meeting undertook to commit itself to working towards being an anti-racist group. We started the Anti Racism Working Group, which began with a series of six weekly meetings and then continued to meet monthly. The mission of the group has been to work against racism both inwardly and outwardly, within ourselves and our Meeting and systemic racism in our society, through study and through action. Some specific actions we took: We reviewed our list of donations and focused it more on local and Black led organizations. We supported the work of the Community Control Now Coalition to get a proposal for a Civilian Oversight Board over the police department on the ballot and ultimately we decided to become a member congregation of the CCN Coalition. We read and discussed Ibrahim X Kendi's book "How to be an Anti Racist" together and talked about ways to implement it. We did worship sharing on a series of searching queries. The Library Committee and especially its Clerk strongly supported this work by providing the Meeting with a number of anti-racism books and resources.

We feel the Meeting has grown in its involvement in the Justice community and in its understanding of the meaning of anti-racism. The need for virtual meetings has been a problem to overcome, but also served to make us accessible in some new ways. Some people were able to attend with us virtually who would not have been with us otherwise. We have had new attenders who only came to us after the shut down. We need to get better about helping these people deepen their engagement with the Meeting. Maintaining ourselves as a spiritual community was a theme of the year. To do this we increased various forms of communication and study. We kept our email list and our FaceBook page more active. We sent out announcements each week of the Zoom and in person worship, with thoughtful queries to consider while preparing ourselves for worship. We hope that this has kept us as a positive spiritual force in people's lives and ready to move forward into a better 2021.