

## NASHVILLE FRIENDS MEETING STATE OF THE MEETING REPORT 2020

The year 2020 was, for Nashville Friends Meeting, marked by three related challenges. First, the Meeting, like the rest of the world, was forced to examine and, where necessary, change its practices to reflect the dangers and ongoing harms of the coronavirus pandemic. Second, the Meeting continued the difficult work of answering the calling to live the Quaker testimonies in a way that serves the causes of peace and social justice. Finally, Nashville Friends Meeting, like many worship communities, faced the ongoing task of finding a place for itself in a society and culture marked by spiritual uncertainty, in which religious attendance and membership have been steeply declining, particularly along generational lines. Although each of these challenges has caused some difficulty and hardship, each has also provided the Meeting with opportunities to strengthen its community and continue to grow in the Spirit.

We closed the Meeting House in early 2020, when it became apparent that ongoing face-to-face activities could not be safely continued. Very shortly thereafter, the Meeting began holding Meeting for Worship and other meetings and activities remotely over Zoom. Meeting electronically has provided an opportunity for the Meeting to explore and reconsider the relationship between geography and community. Some Friends who have left the Nashville area were able to continue worshiping with us and take part in committee work despite their remote locations. The possibility of long-distance worship also allowed us to agree with another Meeting for one of our members to begin a shared sojourning membership with that meeting, while remaining in our area and taking part in activities with Nashville Friends Meeting. Many of our Spiritual Deepening Groups also have continued meeting monthly.

Online Meetings for Worship have proven to be an inviting possibility for curious newcomers, particularly younger adults. We have received over 50 inquiries regarding attendance of our online Meeting for Worship and have seen many welcome new attenders join us. Sadly, a number of Friends find remote worship difficult or unfulfilling and have fallen out of regular attendance. We also lost two beloved members of our community in the last year: Dick Houghton and Clair Sayles Barry. Because of long term illnesses, they had not been able to participate in Meeting in 2020, but they leave holes in our lives and hearts. We welcomed two Friends to membership and had two Friends' memberships transferred to Meetings in other states. All of this considered, our regular Meeting attendance is only a little smaller than in 2019.

Remote meeting has also created opportunities for ongoing social contact without the necessity of time and fuel-consuming travel to the Meeting House. The Meeting has begun hosting weekly online Quaker Conversations sessions on Tuesday evenings that have fostered ongoing connection and a number of enriching discussions. Committees have also continued to meet electronically, including the Prayer Committee, which has taken on the substantial work of providing prayer for those who have needed it through this difficult, dangerous, and loss-filled time.

Although the tool of remote meeting has provided joys and comforts, it is also inescapably true that the physical distance imposed by the pandemic has sometimes proven difficult for the Meeting to bridge, and our efforts have, at times, been insufficient. Early during the pandemic, many Friends took part in a coordinated effort to engage in regular check-ins with members and attenders, including, in particular, those with whom we were not otherwise in regular contact since in-person meetings were suspended. This coordinated effort, however, did not continue, and we fear that the connections that the Meeting once had to some Friends may have been significantly strained or even lost. It has, thankfully, been easier to maintain connections with those Friends who attend Meeting for Worship, and we have continued a practice of weekly check-ins among all those who remain after silence is broken. Adult

education First Hours and a monthly virtual pot luck have also strengthened the community.

No development this year has been a greater cause for excitement of the Spirit in our Meeting than the establishment of a Peace and Justice Committee. We had sadly laid down our old Peace and Social Concerns Committee due to lack of volunteers. The newly formed Peace and Justice Committee drafted two Public Minutes on issues of pressing social concern, both of which were adopted by the Meeting:

- The first of the two minutes, the Meeting's **Social Justice Minute**, declared that the Meeting "stands with the Black Lives Matter movement and all others who seek to dismantle systemic racism in the United States." The Meeting sought to ground the minute, not only in secular principles of justice, but also in our divine principles and obligations as Quakers. Accordingly, the Meeting recognized, for example, that "[i]t is our commitment to nonviolence that challenges us to seek the abolition of the prison-industrial system, in all of its diverse manifestations, and to work towards systems of community justice that support the well-being, health, and safety of all community members." The minute concluded with a number of specific action items that the Meeting has committed to taking in order to honor our social, moral, and religious commitments. The work of executing those action items has begun and will continue in 2021.
- The second Public Minute proposed by the Peace and Justice Committee and adopted by the Meeting was the **Public Minute on Native Place Names**. In that Minute, the Meeting declared: "We believe that it is right and just to honor and respect the Yuchi and Muskogee people who once named all the areas around us, and that it is important to act on restoring Native American names to local places that are of significance to Native American history and culture. In keeping with our testimonies of integrity, equality and stewardship, we believe that we should work together to correct these wrongs and restore Native names to Native places."

Thanks to the leadership from this new Peace and Justice Committee, we have begun a deep, spirit-centered process to take actions based upon our public minutes, and are looking forward to more discernment in 2021. Friends also organized weekly street corner protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement for a period of several months.

In addition to the work of our Peace and Justice Committee, we have pursued matters of social justice through our Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) advocacy team and through members' participation in the Alternatives to Violence Project ("AVP"). The FCNL advocacy team underwent training in 2020 and lobbied one of our U.S. Senators on the issue of racial justice and policing. It has also met with other FCNL advocacy teams in Tennessee to coordinate activities and share strategies. For the first time, the AVP team was privileged to begin work regarding trauma and nonviolence at the Debra K. Johnson Rehabilitation Center (formerly known as the Tennessee State Prison for Women) and to continue working in the local women's jail, until coronavirus made that in-person work impossible. Throughout the course of the shutdown, they have continued to support the incarcerated women in Tennessee facilities through letter writing and submission of letters of recommendation to the parole board. The pandemic also allowed facilitators to attend the National AVP conference, participate in International calls with AVP International and Friends Peace Teams and to help facilitate a Basic Community Workshop with AVP-SC. The AVP team has also continued and expanded on its work of providing training in school and community outreach settings, but these have been hampered by the limitations of the pandemic shutdown.

Other challenges remain. Even prior to the pandemic, this Meeting struggled to provide the support needed by Friends with young children. The necessity to meet remotely has only exacerbated that problem, and we do not have a current group of children taking active part in the Meeting. We have continued our work from the previous year in making the Meeting a more welcoming place for

individuals of all genders, but the work is not finished, and we will continue that effort in 2021 as well. Our financial contributions have declined, although this has, so far, been offset by our reduced costs while we have been meeting remotely. If the reduced giving continues, however, it could pose some financial difficulties for the Meeting in the future. Finally, we have been troubled by the conflict and disharmony that have characterized relations in the Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association for the last year. We have sought to be active contributors to the life of the Yearly Meeting, but we are aware that much still remains to be done and that many wounds have been suffered that must be allowed to heal.