

## **Asheville Friends Meeting**

### **2022 State of the Meeting**

**Queries from SAYMA for our State of the Meeting includes the following:**

What challenges did our Meeting face during the last year?

How did we support and lift each other up?

How did we breathe new life into our testimonies and responses to turmoil in our community and the world?

How did we deepen together spiritually over the past year?

Thank you for this opportunity to assess our rich and fulfilling 2022 year. Often we tend to continue our activities and functions without fully addressing and acknowledging lessons to be learned. We're grateful for the queries that guided us and to all who participated in sharing ideas and thoughts for this summary.

Let us begin with the ways we supported and lifted each other up. As we all know, COVID-19 is still with us and affects everything in our lives. So we've been very careful to search for ways to keep all of us safe and healthy. In particular, we gave care and attention to members' health when deciding on when it was safe to meet indoors. We continued our hybrid Meetings with a Zoom connection for those who preferred virtual attendance or were unable to attend in person. We purchased a better microphone and camera, and a bigger TV to benefit Zoom attenders, and late in the year added high speed internet and WiFi capabilities to further enhance their experience.

Kudos to our treasurer and the assistant treasurer (who lives in Brazil but still remains very active in our Meeting) for keeping our finances in good order. The Zen Center of Asheville now rents space in our Meetinghouse several times weekly for their meditations. This unexpected rental income added to our generous donations in 2022 to give us a healthy year-end balance allowing for an increased budget in 2023. We are especially glad to have contributed \$4,000.00 to General Outreach and \$2,000 to Quaker Outreach since we felt especially moved to address local needs, plus \$3,000 to Racial Justice Outreach and \$4,050.00 for our SAYMA Assessment giving a total of \$13,050.00 in 2022 Outreach.

We continued our efforts from 2021 to be especially welcoming to our visitors. Two Ministry and Counsel members participated in the Friends General Conference Spiritual Deepening webinars on ways to integrate newcomers into the life of the Meeting. M&C as well as Religious Education and others reached out to people we had not seen lately to check in and see how we might help with any needs. Our clerk visited Friends who couldn't come to Meeting. Folks in general supported Friends who needed assistance. Some examples include frequent contact, gifts of food and travel assistance to a family facing serious illness, care for each other through surgeries and loss of loved ones, help with preparation for an individual moving to a new home, aid in reorganizing living space and offering ride sharing (enabling non-drivers to attend Meeting in person). We offered support with cards, notes and visits to an incarcerated Friend as well as care packages sent to her and to some other inmates whom she suggested would welcome them. Many of us participated both personally and financially in business projects initiated by an attender who is a Black racial justice activist in the wider primarily white Asheville community. She offers tremendous gifts as we continue addressing our white prejudices, biases and privileges, i.e. white supremacy.

The youth in First Day School supported each other and grew in their relationships as they involved the Meeting in fun activities that they led. Intergenerational events such as Simple Crafts, Secret Pals and the Christmas play followed by a feast, built connections and deepened all of our relationships. Parents and children spent time with each other and the energy and dedication of the Religious Education Committee exemplified love and respect for our children. Our childcare provider worked with and mentored our youngest Friends while providing care for them and our young families. We gave love and support to our Junior Business Meeting, recognized their Light and empowered them to follow their leadings. Our Junior Business Meeting carried concerns about a number of issues both in our local community and in the world. Our children initiated and sponsored a service project for the homeless by making "warming packets" to hand out. They invited all of us to contribute items for these packets. They also initiated a food collection for Asheville community members who didn't have enough to feed their families. While we recognize the need for more people to be involved upstairs in First Day School, we are blessed with dedicated Friends who minister to our children, who in turn minister to us.

Young Friends discussed their concern and suggested some ways to address human trafficking. Another discussion included finding ways to keep pets with their owners. We supported Southern Appalachian Young Friends by hosting one of their retreats and renting a van for transportation to another retreat. The loss of some teens whose families stopped attending Meeting left a gap. Currently we have two active teens. Much to our delight we approved contracting with a Young Adult Friend to be a part-time youth leader. We welcome Young Adult Friends who add a needed perspective and energy to the Meeting. In addition, Young Adult Friends are taking steps to form a supportive, spiritual and enjoyable community through monthly dinners that include silence, support, and check-ins.

Everyone values our vibrant sharing of joys and concerns after the rise of Meeting which often leads to conversation and offers of help. Fellowship after Meeting for worship helps us get to know each other and enriches our lives. When a new member joined us we welcomed him with a potluck. We are happy to report that new attenders are actively involved in our Meeting. Our work in committees strengthens spirituality in practical ways and builds personal relationships. Committees worked well together and helped each other with their various activities. Many of our committees don't have clerks but on the bright side, our committees are getting new members. We encouraged Friends to speak their truth and listen with open hearts to each other.

Some of the above actions carried over into the wider community and world. Here are some thoughts on breathing new life into our testimonies and responses to turmoil in our community and the world, as we listened to those who felt that they were not being considered. Families continued to support each other in both spiritual and practical ways which reflects our testimonies in action. Our Peace and Equality Testimonies became more real when we gathered with the larger Asheville community at the Martin Luther King Prayer Breakfast and placed a co-sponsoring ad in the souvenir program booklet. Other testimony revelations include the following actions:

- We held a racial justice discussion group weekly on Zoom. We read books together and dug into the issues affecting our local Black community.
- We scheduled speakers from Indigenous and Black communities for our second hour Spiritual Enrichment programs and we continued building relationships with our Indigenous and African American neighbors.
- Faithfully sticking to our postcard writing on fifth Sundays including topics such as thanking Buncombe County Commission members for ongoing reparations funding, supporting gun safety and stopping gun violence, stopping single-use plastics and thanking the January 6th Committee for their work while encouraging our North Carolina legislature to strengthen the criminal code against electoral counts disruption.
- We remembered to bring our Manna Food Bank barrel out to the porch to collect food for those in need throughout our community.

A good example of our response to turmoil as we sought to be as radically just and as ethical as possible included assisting with bail funds, addressing prison conditions and supporting the food workers union. We joined other organizations in co-sponsoring the International Day of Peace in September. Many of us are conflicted about the war in Ukraine and how it relates to our Peace Testimony. We felt led to schedule a time of worship-sharing for us to grapple with this complicated and difficult situation. There are no easy answers and we continue to struggle with this issue.

One big challenge during 2022 involved the continuing incidence of COVID. As mentioned above, it was difficult deciding how to hold Meeting for worship safely for all of us. We spent much of our time worshipping outdoors to maximize safety for our vulnerable members and attenders. Parents with young children helped us realize that they felt left out of some COVID decisions and were not able to join Meeting for Worship because we were not holding First Day School in person. Eventually we decided to use the CDC COVID Community Level for Buncombe County to determine mask use while in the Meetinghouse. We lost some families during COVID, some of whom have not returned. We questioned how to keep people on Zoom involved. Sometimes people online dropped off due to inadequate internet connection. Personal grief, grief for our suffering planet, grief over tension in the Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association and the feeling of loss from our nearest neighboring Friends meeting, Swannanoa Valley Friends Meeting leaving SAYMA, all weighed on us.

We also grappled with how to respect and honor our Peace Testimony and at the same time support sovereignty and self-determination in Ukraine. Friends expressed feelings of sorrow, frustration and guilt. Our children reminded us that we need to hold Russia, as well as Ukraine in the Light. Some among us asked whether we feel the same about war in countries outside Europe. Some among us pointed out the contradiction between our silent acquiescence to the use of military force in Ukraine's resistance to Russian occupation, even though our Meeting has consistently opposed the use of military force in Palestine's resistance to Israeli occupation.

A series of Meetinghouse repairs/improvements were needed this year which reminded us to always budget resources to maintain our more than 100-year-old space. The Library room became a storage room during COVID and part of it housed space for children under 2½ and their toys. Books were left off shelves and some were in bad shape and/or outdated. Many hours of effort by several people were required to restore the Library to good order. Since we didn't meet inside for such a long time, all of our space shows some signs of neglect.

Moving on to spiritual aspects of our Meeting in 2022, some noted that there are more “gathered Meetings” than in past years with fewer “popcorn” Meetings, indicating a deepening in our spirituality. We also deepened our spiritual relationships by meeting in small groups, focusing on a variety of issues important to the community. Getting back to worshipping in person has been wonderful.

M&C purchased several copies of the Pendle Hill Pamphlet, *Beyond Consensus, Salvaging Sense of the Meeting* by Barry Morley for us to read and share with each other. We then scheduled a second hour to discuss what we learned about essential components in discovering a sense of the Meeting and how it differs from consensus. As we discern a way forward, the release after sharing a message, long focus and transition to Light all result in a valuable spiritual experience.

Keeping community members informed and connected through the online Weekly Digest contributes to our spirituality. Sharing our struggles with each other and reaching out when

someone wrestles spiritually brings meaning and usefulness to our Meeting. Getting together to reflect and write this State of the Meeting report helps to deepen our spirituality, as well. And we mention one more time the continuing concern and worship-sharing on our Peace Testimony. One of our newer members states “Joining the community has deepened my spirituality and my identity as a Quaker. Becoming a contributing member of the community has deepened my spirituality even further. Having space with the young adults, the SAYF community as well as the larger community as a whole have all been deeply spiritually rich.” Another Friend concludes that a good part of spirituality involves silent prayer and recognizing the Divine’s presence throughout the day, and that actions that one is involved in can be spiritual as well.

Our work last year was rich and fulfilling. It extended to inward and outward actions that are important to us, to the rest of our Quaker community, our wider community and the world. We’re excited about the rejuvenation of our Meeting and we look forward to seeing where the renewed energy leads us in 2023.