

## **State of the Meeting Report for 2022**

Nashville Friends Meeting

*March 26, 2023*

Each year, Nashville Friends Meeting (“NFM”) uses its State of the Meeting Report as an opportunity to survey the joys and challenges that defined the previous year. This year, too, the Report will try to pull together the various threads of continuity, progress, and frustrations that we faced over the preceding twelve months. We have found, however, that many of the meeting’s disparate challenges share one contributing factor that has come to cast an unavoidable shadow over the life of the meeting: the increasingly uncertain role of religion in American public life. That uncertainty poses serious challenges—some obvious, some less so—to the meeting’s efforts to build its community, meet the spiritual needs of its members and attenders, and find a place for itself in the broader civic life of the city in which we worship, while seeking a tolerant, pluralistic vision of religion in society, in which no one’s faith is mandated or imperiled.

The area in which these issues are perhaps most prominent is pastoral care. Pastoral care draws on ancient models of spiritual and social support, and, while many aspects of those models are indispensable and must be preserved, we have also found that simply trying to provide pastoral care in the manner of the past has too often fallen short. The ways that people communicate have changed. Attitudes regarding familiarity, trust, and boundaries have changed. Meanwhile, many Friends have no reliable, preexisting model for how to either give or receive the pastoral care that we know to be central to the responsibilities of the meeting. In 2022, our Ministry & Counsel Committee tried to provide the care that was needed, but too often failed to do so. In an effort to improve matters, we have established a Pastoral Care Working Group that focuses specifically on that task.

Another persistent challenge has been providing a welcoming environment that fosters individuals’ fully joining into the life of the meeting, including through committee membership and participation in corporate decision making. Here, too, we have been forced to reckon with the fact that many Friends come to us without an established expectation of what participation in a religious congregation does or should entail. That lack of a framework, combined with the opacity that so often characterizes individuals’ first encounters with the Friends, has made it difficult to bring curious seekers fully into our community. We are taking steps to address this issue, as well, including by planning an event for newcomers in March of 2023 and seeking to kindle new interest in our spiritual deepening groups. For the time being, however, we remain a meeting in which a great deal of work and responsibility is concentrated among a small number of longstanding Friends. Meanwhile, many curious attenders leave meeting for worship without a full, accurate picture of who NFM is and what we believe.

Other problems also persist. We have noted, in past Reports, that our meeting is often

constrained by its lack of diversity, and that continues to be the case. We also continue to have an uneasy relationship with the Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association (“SAYMA”), although we hope that that is improving. Many of our members and attenders either have no relationship with SAYMA or are actively skeptical of SAYMA’s ability to function as a spirit-led community. NFM has been trying to hold space for healing with the broader SAYMA community, but this process still requires time.

The past year has had successes, as well, which we celebrate. Although we have still struggled, at times, to bring families with children into the life of the Meeting, we have made significant strides in establishing the policies and infrastructure necessary to support families when they do join us, thanks to the work of our Children’s Education Committee and the meeting’s decision to prioritize childcare as a budgetary matter. While we hope to bring in more families in the future, the children who have attended meeting have nourished us deeply.

We approved one new member in 2022 and were joined by many new attenders. We participated in the transfer of the membership of two members who had moved to another city.

Another cherished development is the fact that the Nashville Friends who participate in the Alternatives to Violence Project have been able to resume their important work with incarcerated individuals, which had been heavily disrupted by COVID.

In November, Nashville Friends Meeting hosted a regional weekend retreat, "Listening 4 Justice," with the focus on anti-racism work, both individually and in our meeting. The workshop, led by Folami Prescott-Adams, included Nashville, Birmingham, Knoxville, Memphis and Chattanooga Meetings with overnight local hospitality.

Our Prayer Committee continues to be foundational to the meeting by devotedly holding those for whom it has been requested in the Light. The committee’s list of individuals to hold up in prayer has now reached four single-spaced pages, yet the members of the committee have not wavered in their efforts. Many of us have felt the power of the committee’s invitation of the Divine into our lives and are better for it.

Our discerned reallocation of our charitable giving, overseen by the Peace and Justice Committee, has made us significantly more responsive to the values of the meeting and what we perceive to be the needs of our Nashville community. We have remained mindful that our commitment to justice must be accompanied by action and that one of the types of action we are well-situated to take is the provision of needed resources.

Another type of spiritually led work toward justice that our meeting has supported is a group of Friends’ work as the Nashville Advocacy Team of the Friends Committee on National Legislation (“FCNL”). The team has worked together with other FCNL advocacy teams across the country, lobbying our elected officials in a non-partisan way, to support peacebuilding.

We have tried to find opportunities through which we can lend our voices as Quakers to

public discussions. In past years, that has taken the form of public minutes, such as our public minutes on social justice and indigenous place names, as well as other vehicles, such as our adoption of a land acknowledgment. Although we did not issue any such public minutes in 2022, we continue to look for chances to join public conversations in a way that is constructive and divinely led.

Our Adult Education Committee has presented and arranged for regular Second Hours that have both enriched the collective life of the meeting and given us opportunities to grow in our knowledge of each other in the Spirit.

Perhaps most hearteningly, although we sometimes struggle to find a shared language that expresses each of our experiences, the Spirit remains present in our meetings for worship.

Nashville Friends Meeting remains a meeting in transition and perhaps will be so for the foreseeable future. Religion itself, after all, is in a period of transition, as is our broader society. Indeed, close examination would probably reveal that even the eras of the past that we associate with constancy and stagnation have been rich with transformation and potential beneath the surface. NFM therefore embraces its changing nature. It does so, though, with an awareness that with change often come precarity and risk. Our hope is that we can grow together in the Spirit in 2023 to ensure that the changes we undergo are spirit-led.