

Friends Meeting of Austin
State of the Meeting Report
March 14, 2021

Friends Meeting of Austin (FMA) is completing a unique year of virtual worship, virtual education, and virtual committee meetings due to COVID restrictions. The Meeting has met these challenges well but has experienced some change in the make-up of those who attend Meeting for worship. Some have found that they cannot experience community or the Spirit in virtual meetings, while others, who are geographically distant or mobility challenged, have become new enthusiastic participants. Forums and Adult religious education have experienced high attendance rates. This has been a period of inward seeking and discernment in small groups due to our circumstances. We have been able to reach out to the community in various ways during this period of financial and emotional hardship.

The following is the state of the meeting report from FMA to be submitted at the South Central Yearly Meeting 2021 annual sessions. Responses to the queries are based on forums held on February 14, 2021, and February 28, 2021.

Worship

How does the spirit illuminate our meeting's worship? How do we encourage ministry and seek to deepen the spiritual life of the meeting and of individual Friends?

It is sometimes helpful to rephrase the query by removing the word "How".

Sometimes the spirit illuminates our meeting's worship, and sometimes it doesn't. We have very little control. We have to wait patiently.

For most of the year, as we have been experiencing a different way of Worship due to the transition to Zoom meetings. Friends we haven't seen for years are attending. Some regulars don't attend due to not feeling the Spirit on Zoom.

Older children above toddler age are not attending meeting, which is a shame, but expected due to the nature of Zoom. Infants and toddlers are more present than usual.

The period between Yearly Meetings corresponds to the time of the pandemic. We wonder how can the Spirit be experienced? Do individuals need to be with one another in person? It may be more difficult for the Spirit to be felt via Zoom, and therefore it is all the more remarkable when it does. We recognize that this format doesn't work for some. However, we have kept Spirit alive during a challenging time.

Those who have attended Worship still reflect the illumination of Spirit. Though we can't be physically present; this illumination is the "results of the Spirit".

Meeting Community

How does our meeting's community reflect its corporate spiritual strivings? How do Friends care for one another in time of spiritual or material need? What role do children play in the meeting community?

Forum attendance has remained steady despite COVID.

We've been open with concerns and people to be held in the Light.

Including and involving children has been difficult. However, socially distanced Halloween and Nativity parties were held. A fringe benefit of Zoom is that we save recordings, which was not done pre-pandemic. In this time of COVID, the children's role has been to bring hope and joy to us "oldsters". Another great source of joy is the of babies who have been born during this period, who we were introduced to on Zoom. Babies are a joy to watch.

Ministry is broader than Worship. We can now provide worship to those who were previously "disconnected" due to distance or infirmities via Zoom.

Another benefit of Zoom is that we can hear each other better. The different relationship between silence and speech on Zoom has created a different atmosphere and a different type of listening when we are gathered.

Due to our profoundly altered circumstances, we have been examining the state of the Meeting in small groups more than usual. One individual expressed sadness about those who are not participating. On the other hand, those who are participating in smaller groups are experiencing an increased sense of closeness. Examples include the Health Committee and the Anti Racism group. We are posing more questions than usual. We are examining the state of the Meeting more than usual as a result.

One Friend has an acquaintance, a musician, who lives on sailboat. The musician observed that on the rare occasions when solo sailors were able to meet in taverns, those conversations went on for hours. Today in the time of COVID we are also "solo sailors". "Time to talk in the tavern" may be compared with our to Zoom meetings.

Friends care for one another via the Benevolence Fund, for example. We have met and tried to identify ways to fulfill everyone's spiritual needs. We have provided information about how to get vaccinated for those who are having trouble navigating the system. Generosity is reflected in the contributions to the COVID fund totaling \$15,000.

The strong commitment to the Meeting this year is evidenced by the 19 people who are attending this State of the Meeting gathering. In previous years it used to be 6-8 people. "The striving is still there" .

Religious Education

How has study deepened our faith and our understanding of what it means to be a Quaker?
How have we explored issues of faith with newcomers, seasoned Friends, and children?
Having video recordings available has made Quaker education more accessible.

Quakerism 101 was successful. Forums have included Introduction to Baha'i, and a variety of others. These broaden and deepen our spiritual life. Friendly Notes regularly lists SCYM meetings, "geezer" lunches, and Bible Study gatherings, for example. There is a long list of opportunities for spiritual deepening.

Quakerism 101 is now a regularly scheduled annual event, though it was only sporadically offered in the past. We started last's Spring's course right as COVID began. The course is not just for newcomers. Seasoned Friends and newcomers alike discuss Quaker history, the testimonies, etc.

We have 30-40 Forums per year on the most varied topics from Scripture all the way to community organizations.

Extremely diverse presenters have participated this year- not just those who have expertise on Quakerism, but many topics. The broad variety of topics reflects the expansive manner in which adult education is defined by the Meeting.

Informal discussions are held one half hour after the rise of meeting. This provides opportunities to explore issues of faith with newcomers. These discussions have brought us together as a community. Due to the Zoom format, everyone sits at the same table in effect, so everyone hears what is being said.

Testimonies

How have we, as a meeting, witnessed to Friends testimonies? How has our meeting stood, by faith, against injustice and helped those in need?

We have witnessed to Friends testimonies, stood against injustice, and helped those in need via Care and Council, the Benevolence Fund, the Peace and Social Concerns Committee, the Anti Racism Awareness group and the FCNL advocacy team. We have reached out more than usual since COVID happened.

We have been "wood shedding" because we can't "play music" with others. This may make us less spontaneous in our communications, but also more polished.

The stewardship of our property has included improvements to the outdoor spaces like the driveway repair and interior improvements like the kitchen, for example. These have made our property more hospitable. The outdoor work has continued to some extent despite COVID.

We have been trying to address systemic racism. This last year has offered a unique opportunity to recognize injustice within ourselves. We have been seeking ways to make a difference. Unfortunately in some contexts the lack of ability to do face to face interaction is hampering our efforts.

We wrote specific minutes in June 2020 pertaining to both police violence against people of color and also the 13th amendment. A query was posed at Meeting for Business: How has Meeting reflected our intention to be an anti-racist community?

One example of witnessing for Testimonies was providing reduced rent for our tenants - the school and Austin Tan Cerca. Another was the sharing of funds that Meeting participated in with other Quaker meetings. We also paid the housekeeper and the childcare workers their regular wages at the beginning of COVID. However, the childcare organization was not able to continue distribution of funds to those people.

The COVID Fund was implemented. People of color and those who do not qualify for aid from other agencies have been prioritized. It reflects our anti - racist position.

Monthly meeting has sent letters regarding executions to the Texas governor and to the Board of Parole. One example was Robin Story Dunn (not at the time affiliated with Meeting), who five years ago assisted a man on death row via legal services to be removed from death row and freed from prison.

Decision Making

How is the good order of Friends used among us? How does the Light illuminate our meetings for worship with attention to business? How does our meeting deal in love with the inevitable differences that arise from diverse leadings and points of view on issues of faith and practical matters?

On April 25, 2020 at a Quaker 101 session, it was noted that there was higher Zoom attendance, and therefore more participation of those who may not know the "good order of friends".

The "good order of friends" is exemplified by the process that the Meeting has been following regarding decision making. An ad-hoc Resources committee was tasked 2 years ago with determining how to allocate the meetings resources. An outcome was some specific recommendations or leadings that were passed onto other committees. An issue came up, the group was brought together, decisions were made, unity was found, then actions proposed to subcommittees. This process unfolded over a couple of years. This process was perceived as "good order" by a relative newcomer to the Meeting.

The good order of Friends can be witnessed in our reaction to the COVID crisis. After our first hybrid meeting was held, we made the decision to move to virtual worship. This was implemented very successfully. A suggestion arose concerning special donations to support those in the time of COVID. This went through the proper channels and was successfully implemented. This is an FMA example of good Quaker order.

Other examples of the good order of friends include the meeting for determining the future of gatherings and events at the Meeting House. When it came to other faith groups that used the Meeting House, decisions were made in love, people were listening with open hearts, and then a decision was ultimately made by the Meeting. Another example: During a Meeting for Worship there was a change in the standard procedures at the rise of meeting. We missed a portion of it, and someone indicated that something had been missed. A Friend stepped in and used this as an example of racism. Failure to listen is an attribute of silencing someone's voice. The speaker's message was given in a non chastising way.

A Friend noted that with regard to the clerking of both business and the other committees, it is impressive how much the clerks of meeting and associate clerks are so very committed to doing things in the Light and in a state of worship. They are always trying to move towards that.

Young Friends and others that were not active in past years are now actively involved in Meeting decision making. The involvement of these Friends carries us in relevant directions. The observation was made that within the past year the Peace and Social Committee went from monthly meetings to weekly meetings. This time was used to determine where COVID funds would be distributed.

Examples were given of how we deal in love with our inevitable differences or failings. These include situations where someone misunderstands something factually, or what was supposed to be done, or several people taking an initiative without the proper channels. We don't let that get in our way. We make it into something fruitful that we can learn from. Some of us have been in other groups where people rage at each other because someone didn't understand a given rule.

One participant inquired whether there were ways we could improve our decision making speed. She had heard recently that we don't make decisions fast, which is by definition Quakerly! However, we should move towards making decisions or plans in advance related to emergency preparedness.

Because of the slow decision making process, the formation of the committee to prepare the Meeting House and Meeting for Zoom due to COVID didn't just come about, but was discussed for more than a month. When the ice storm and power outage hit us during a pandemic, Quaker action took time. These are examples of the difficulties of making decisions quickly in a crisis. Decision making was very difficult under the circumstances - a wake-up call to try to think about these things in advance.

Many of our committees haven't been keeping minutes. We could improve. However, it is hard to find someone who has capacity to record so often. We have dealt with that by using agendas as the record of discussions. Actions are reflective of the work of the committee. A long-time meeting member noted that we do re-make decisions which may be a result of not taking careful minutes. Our minutes for Business Meeting are good, but don't always reflect what is going on in committees.

Intervisitation and Outreach

How has Intervisitation and involvement with Friends outside our meeting affected our meeting's spiritual growth? How have we reached out to seekers and the community around us?

One unexpected benefit of COVID has been the ability to connect with more people via Zoom meetings. The Farquars from England and other Friends from an earlier time have had an easy option to drop into Meeting for Worship since Zoom meetings were started last year. People who were not part of our meeting in the past are also participating.

There is a certain irony about video conferencing. The life of Intervisitation coming to know each other across distances is occurring in some respects, but because of the format it is hard to form friendships and relationships. So this is a weakness of video conferencing. We've done the best with what we have.

Broader Quaker conferences have had expanded participation. All Friends will have to face a choice in the future regarding whether to meet in person or online. Zoom meetings afford the irresistible opportunity to make experiences among friends available to everybody.

One Friend noted that the Austin meeting has not had as strong a tie with the Georgetown worship group as we have had in past years, possibly due to key members moving out of the area. The Georgetown worship group has not been meeting since the facility they were using has not been available due to COVID. However, Georgetown has been communicating with the Yearly Meeting. They perceive themselves as their own monthly meeting. Georgetown members are calling and still associating with each other. The Austin Meeting should make more of an effort be in touch with them.

We have had a wide variety of guest speakers for Forums. We are inviting seekers from outside the community into the life of the meeting.

We have continued to stay in touch with the East Austin community of Islam and their membership to see how we can be supportive of them during the time of COVID, especially during the ice storm.

A buddy system was implemented by Care and Council and connected to Outreach within our meeting. Care and Council made the original proposal that buddies be matched up - those who needed support, and those who wanted to help. One friend noted that she found this to be useful in deepening her relationship with someone else in the meeting. She would like that to continue.

The Austin Meeting provides outreach to prisoners and those incarcerated. However, it is not easy to make the connection or to sustain it. Our annual tradition of writing death row holiday cards produced many requests from prisoners for pen pals. We have found pen pals for most of them (including non Quakers).

Membership Changes

How has our membership changed? How has this affected the life of our meeting?

We have had 2 births of children in Meeting this past year - a grandchild, and a Tan Circa child. At the end of the session of Yearly Meeting, the names of the births and adoptions and deaths were read aloud. It is helpful to list the birth and deaths in the State of the Meeting report prior to sending the report to South Central meeting.

There have been no deaths among our members and attenders during the last year which was a pandemic period. This suggests that we are doing a good job with not spreading the virus and taking good care of each other.

No clearness for membership has been convened this past year. This may reflect our current ambiguity about membership. However, we recently had two forums about the membership process. Additionally, this past week, we received an application for membership. A Clearness Committee has been formed.

Though we have acquired new attenders on Zoom, there are a fair amount of people that we have not seen in a year. One Friend believes that these people are with us in spirit. It may be a function of Meeting for Worship being held on Zoom rather than in person.

Concerns

Does our meeting have concerns that have not been adequately explored in answering the queries above? How have these concerns affected our meeting's spiritual and community life?

With regard to outreach, we took steps to provide kitchen support for those who wanted to feed the unhoused. We discussed making the Meetinghouse a voting location. We talked about other ways to make the Meeting House available for other community activities.

We have been able put lots of information online that is of lasting value to both the Meeting and to the community.

Two members of the Meeting provided incredible support by holding a memorial service online for an individual (Deloria Grant) who died of COVID in December of 2020.

FMA rules are occasionally broken. This past year we dealt with an incident of homophobic Facebook posts by an attender. A number of people responded to the incident on Facebook. It should be noted that there were a number of meetings and actions taken that were not punitive, but hopefully resolved the issue at hand.

The neighbor who built a house on the other side of the FMA property fence broke a promise to the Meeting. He said he would replace the trees and did. However, when he asked if he could use our parking area for a couple of cars, many cars were parked there according to photographic evidence. The Meeting has not taken decisive action regarding this.

It was noted that the period covered by the State of the Meeting report corresponds to the COVID period. It is a report of our life with the pandemic. It has been an experiment of a different kind of life in the Meeting. We should reflect on this.

Births in the FMA Community

Felix Panayiotis Shaw, born January 30, 2021 to Patrick Forsythe Shaw and Alexandra Bassiakou Shaw.