

Live Oak Friends Meeting, Houston, Texas
2020 State of the Meeting Report
Clerk Leada Dietz

Minute 2020-12 # 03: Grieving the Effects of Covid-19

We find ourselves experiencing a pandemic unparalleled in our lifetimes. As we struggle to cope with its overwhelming effects on our communities, livelihoods, and families, we find ourselves immersed in both individual and collective grief and our world immersed in a spirit of trauma.

We wish to acknowledge the profound state of mourning in our nation and our world for those lost to the novel coronavirus. As of December 2020, the death count in our nation is over 300,000. Worldwide deaths exceed one and a half million. We hold in the Light all those who have died and their loved ones, friends, and families. We hold in the Light all those who may have been unable to be present while their loved ones were ill and unable to mourn together afterward. There are those who have died from other causes, whose loved ones may feel their losses have been marginalized or were the result of reduced quality of healthcare due to the pandemic. We sympathize with those who have lost employment, social supports, even their homes.

While disasters such as hurricanes or floods can bring people together, a pandemic tends to drive us apart. Thus, a pandemic of loneliness is also occurring. We hold in the Light those who are experiencing isolation from various measures aimed at reducing community spread. Many of our seniors are spending their twilight years without social contact with loved ones; individuals with disabilities are more isolated; children and teens cannot socialize normally. There is upheaval due to disruptions in our schools, colleges, religious organizations, and sports, taking a toll across all age groups. Employment and healthcare have been lost, companies closed, prospects dimmed, with devastating economic results. Some children and domestic partners are experiencing a loss of safety due to increased abuse and neglect.

We mourn not only the loss of those who have died of the novel coronavirus, we mourn losses of all kinds for those who have not.

At the same time, we have become more appreciative of innumerable members of our society who cannot work from home, who brave the risk of exposure to keep others safe and fed--people such as meat packers, grocery workers, custodians, and transportation workers. We express our gratitude not only to our heroically faithful medical personnel but to all essential workers in so many occupations. And we are all the more grateful, joyful, and inspired, when we are able to spend time in fellowship with our friends and families.

Two thousand and twenty was the year of the COVID-19 novel corona virus pandemic. LOFM has been resilient as we changed to meet the challenges of the most serious pandemic in our lifetime. Instead of meeting for worship in person we started video conferencing in March and continued to do so throughout the year. In spite of not meeting together physically, it was a very productive year for the Meeting. The extra effort needed to connect with each other led to the potential for a deeper sense of spiritual community.

Worship and Community during a pandemic

During a year of Covid-19 social distancing and virtual interaction, our electronic communications have been instrumental in maintaining community connections. The

weekly e-newsletter reaches an average of 100 current and past members and attenders. Outreach has been by way of website and Facebook links. A new Facebook LOFM private group has 71 members connecting current members with former members now living elsewhere. Regular email inquiries continue to be received.

The Care and Concern Committee also used funds from the Assistance Budget for correspondence that is not electronic with folks isolated by the Covid-19 pandemic and to keep contact with the children of LOFM. One Friend also created a pamphlet, featuring a teddy bear, called "Zippy Minds the Meeting" to send to the children to remind them of the life that awaits their return to Live Oak.

Use of video conferencing via Zoom has not only enabled us to worship together but has had its benefits. While we miss Friends who do not worship online, other Friends who did not attend in person have been able to take part. Some Friends have expressed their surprise at the quality of worship they experience in a group video call, occasionally even feeling like they have experienced a covered meeting. We were able to maintain committee activity and host many of our usual community functions:

- a. Meeting for Worship continues every week with 20-30 in attendance
- b. Committees meet regularly to conduct meeting business
- c. Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business
- d. Weekly adult first day school attendance doubled by meeting online, now with 12-15 in attendance
- e. Meeting for Worship with Attention to Healing continues to meet monthly
- f. Wednesday night group continues to meet most weeks
- g. Spring Worship Group meeting jointly with LOFM for worship on First Day
- h. Memorial sharing for three of those Friends who passed away this year was held online
- i. Members have participated in webinars on a variety of socially relevant issues
- j. One Q101 series was held online, which was attended by 6 Friends. With the advantage of video conferencing, one attender from the Baton Rouge Meeting and a former attender from LOFM who now lives in Georgetown, Texas, were able to attend.
- k. The Annual Candle-lighting was held online as Covid-19 numbers began to climb in our area. We enjoyed carol singing to the accompaniment of Kate Wasserman's guitar and Teresa Grawunder's flute in the safety of our own homes.

Use of the Land

The Quaker Barter Fair and a concert by Jim Presley of blues and Native American music were combined on the land on a pleasant winter afternoon. Jim donated the concert proceeds to LOFM to help Friends in need. The Barter Fair drew close to 40 people, more than half of them from LOFM, including 6 youth.

Sunset viewings of the James Turrell Skyspace, which had ceased during the early months of the pandemic, resumed in June, with just one docent.

Neighbors used our grounds more than ever as a playground and an open space for dogs to stretch their legs; outdoor recreation became vital while so many were working

at home and socially isolating. The Meeting participated in the world-wide pandemic social outreach of putting a teddy bear in the window to greet families taking walks together in place of the many organized recreational programs that had been cancelled.

After much discernment, we closed our drop-off for paper recycling due to concomitant dumping, ending a multi-decade service to the community.

A plan was developed for replacing the deteriorated porch and ramp leading up to the Little House with a newly designed, and more functional porch and ramp that can serve as activity space, also. The new construction can be completed in early 2021, conveniently, before we return to regular meetings on the land.

Spring Worship Group

Live Oak took under the care of the meeting a worship group that formed in the Northwest Houston area named the Spring Quakers Worship Group. It has a meeting place at Plymouth United UCC on Louetta Rd. in Spring. The Spring Quakers Worship Group is currently meeting online with Live Oak's Meeting for worship on Sunday. It meets separately online for worship and sharing on Wednesday evenings.

Finances

The Meeting's finances are healthy. Due to Covid-19, building rentals were suspended through the majority of 2020 resulting in a reduction of rental income. However, member donations helped offset the reduction. The meetinghouse roof hatch sensor/stop was replaced; a roof hatch maintenance category is now budgeted for future maintenance needs. Finally, the Meeting invested in the Friends Fiduciary Growth and Income balanced fund to increase return on meeting funds.

We maintained our regular contributions to Quaker and non-Quaker social justice organizations. We also enabled a contribution to Lebanon following the destructive explosion on August 4, 2020, and to AFSC and Friends Peace Teams following two destructive hurricanes in Central America in November. We completed our fund raising for Peace by Piece, the organization raising money to purchase property in New Orleans for a community garden.

Social Action

The Peace and Social Action Committee brought three minutes to the Meeting, one calling for support of "No Way to Treat a Child, HR 2407", and another in support of "Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Reservation Reaffirmation Act, HR 312" to address efforts to reclaim tribal land, both of which were adopted by the Meeting. A third proposed Minute on addressing white supremacy and police violence has led to prolonged and thought-provoking discussion and education on subjects surrounding racial disparities and uncovering unconscious racial biases and has yet to be affirmed. We have also engaged in two book discussion groups on *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo and, hopefully, will lead to on-going engagement with other books on eliminating racism.

For the last year Live Oak Friends Meeting has sent a representative to the Clinton Foundation's Center for Recovery's Faith and Opioids Roundtable-Houston. This organization educates faith leaders on drug addiction and recovery so that they can help their congregations.

Members of LOFM participated in two webinars on facilitating communication on difficult subjects across ideological divides, one sponsored by American Friends Service Committee on Radical Acting in Faith for White People and one on Spiritual Activism Training sponsored by the Network of Spiritual Progressives.

Continuing Community Issues

Participation in community responsibilities: We continue to struggle to fill all the clerking positions, as well as filling out committees. There has been a shrinkage in the number of Friends who feel led to join committees over the past few years. Some committees don't have enough members and energy, which leads to a concern that people may be participating in committee work more out of duty rather than serving from a place of joy. When committees lose their vitality more work falls on the shoulders of the Clerk of Meeting; we are painfully aware that past clerks have experienced "burn out" and left meeting following their service.

Nominating has asked the larger community to be involved in decisions about reorganizing the Meeting's committee structure to meet our current needs. We encourage committees to think about who in the meeting might be interested in their work and personally invite them to attend their next scheduled committee meeting. At the same time, the Nominating Committee continues to encourage Friends to use their gifts and leadings for the benefit of our community.

Children's Program: All our long serving Children's First Day School teachers had the year off this year. The number of children regularly active in FDS was 11 before we stopped meeting in March, although we have continued to communicate with 14. The Children's Religious Education Committee, as with other committees, could use some fresh inspiration from Friends willing to help out.

Re-opening

An ad-hoc committee has been appointed to discern how and when we should resume meeting in person. Having adapted to meeting online, the Meeting now has a strong interest in re-opening in a way to gather both in-person and online. We have accomplished much with video conferencing, but we look forward to being together again.

Memorials

Although, perhaps, none were directly connected to Covid-19, we had more losses of Friends by death in 2020, than usual. The preparation of seven Memorial Minutes made us keenly aware of our loss and how much each Friend means to our community. Reviewing these lives made us more mindful and appreciative of the gifts of friends and

family that are still with us, but that we sometimes take for granted. We were awakened to how grateful we are for one another.

At Yearly Meeting in September 2020, LOFM remembered four Friends with Memorial Minutes: member Ortrud Hauwert (April 23, 2017), Robert Stecker (June 26, 2020), member Darrell Austin Hutto (July 6, 2020), and member MaryBeth Smith (July 13, 2020). We felt these losses acutely.

Our community suffered three more deaths in 2020, whom we will remember at this yearly meeting in April 2021: member Warren Stutts Jr. (April 28, 2019), member R. Dale Garretson (June 23, 2020), member Margaret "Peg" Nosek (November 21, 2020).

Weddings

Member Erick Armentrout and Christina Ricketts married on April 10, 2020, in Crawford, McLennan County, Texas, not under the care of the meeting.