

## **Friends Meeting of Austin – 2023 State of the Meeting**

### **1. Worship: How does the Spirit encourage ministry and seek to deepen the spiritual life of the meeting and of individual Friends?**

Spirit moves our Meeting to provide ministry in various ways. Our vocal ministry contains lessons for us both as individuals and as a community. Hearing vocal ministry makes a difference in our lives. However, there is a concern that Meeting may still be too silent. When there are many completely silent Meetings, it might mean that people are intimidated by the weight of speaking ministry, or that we aren't open to the call of Spirit. This has started to change over the last couple of months and we are glad to have begun hearing from those who may not have previously shared vocal ministry. Is it possible that the lull in vocal ministry was an aftermath of the pandemic?

### **2. 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?**

Having children back in Meeting, First Day School, and new children in the community has been a great blessing. We missed their presence during COVID. It feels like there's a new spring in the Meeting. Parents report that their children are excited to go to the Garden House on Sundays.

It's also wonderful to have parents involved in Meeting. Parents come to a new understanding of what it means to be a Friend, by sharing their faith with their children, and by involving their children in the life of the community.

The challenge with First Day School is always to reach critical mass in each age group. We haven't gotten there yet with older children. For example, we don't have a group for teenagers. We're committed to trying to build these groups so that families can remain involved with Meeting.

We're always working on doing a good job of taking care of each other. Care & Counsel and other small groups have stepped up to care for those in need. It's reassuring to know that that support is there; the requested budget for the benevolence fund was increased this current fiscal year, which is an indication that the need is great.

We've had a heartfelt discussion about whether hybrid meetings are necessary and appropriate. In the end, it was clear that hybrid meetings are an important way of including people. Hybrid worship is a break from tradition and from things that are tested and true; however, we're glad that we're taking this risk and feel that our decision was Spirit led. We really listened to each other and to Spirit. These discussions reminded one Friend of the discussions we had at the beginning of the pandemic about whether to continue in-person worship. At that time, we also listened to one another and considered the needs of our neighbors who share our physical space, the East Austin Community of Al-Islam.

We've invested a lot of time and money into setting up a new sound system that's made it much easier to hear spoken ministry and makes Meeting accessible to people on Zoom.

These physical changes to the Meeting House have resulted in changes to the lived onsite experience of Worship. We have worked mindfully to address the potential impact of technology on the experience of those who choose to worship in person, by for instance moving the zoom screen from a cart to the wall; and by continuing to troubleshoot audio support for all, including those with hearing aids.

The Georgetown Texas Worship Group continues to meet, and is in regular communication with our Friendly Communication committee.

### **3. 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?**

We have a wonderful Quakerism 101 program that has been running annually and is well attended. We have almost 40 10 am forums a year that address a range of topics. However, some people find the extra hour in the morning too much, especially if there are other activities after Meeting for Worship as well. Another concern is that many of our 10 am forums have been about social concerns. They have been meaningful, but it would be good to have more spiritual journey forums and other opportunities to talk about our experiences with Spirit. What are some other ways we could be doing adult religious education? For instance, it might also be helpful to have study or reading groups.

One Friend proposed a couple of queries of anyone presenting at Meeting, whether in forum or in First Day School: Is this educational activity merely interesting, or does it deepen our faith? Are we seeing how the Spirit might be opened by our learning?

A lot of Quaker education happens outside of our formal educational programs in one-to-one conversations, in worship, and in committee work. That education extends beyond our community. One Friend shared that a lot of their personal Quaker growth is happening with online Quaker groups because technology and the pandemic has made it easier to connect with people far away. What effect will this have on our community? Is physical proximity important to religious education?

### **4. 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?**

Our active opposition to the Texas death penalty is an important witness both for our community and for the outside world.

We had a COVID fund to help underserved communities, that we laid down this year. Other examples of our testimonies in the world include once-monthly simple meal fundraisers, and our ongoing Columbia Ministry support formed in the 1980's to support the peace, social justice and medical work of members Paul Stukey and Carol Byler in rural Colombia.

Our anti-racism awareness group continues to examine the persistent impact of racism within our community through once-monthly meetings, which include readings, outreach to

City Council, and discernment about what anti-racism means for both individuals and the larger Meeting.

Holiday cards for death row inmates are an annual activity in which we sometimes struggle to involve the full Meeting. This year, they went like hot cakes, and we collaborated for the first time with Austin Abolitionists, a community organization that shares our values. Some people were disappointed that they didn't get any cards to write. This has never been the case before.

In recent years, our Peace and Social Concerns Committee has been much more active. Part of the committee's success has been bringing peace and justice work to the Meeting rather than doing it all themselves. That work brings our community together. We support each other, educate members and attenders, and build solidarity with others outside the Meeting in a sometimes-hostile political environment.

**5. 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?**

Friends Meeting of Austin follows Quaker good order. Most agenda items start in committees and then come to Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business. We use ad hoc committees and threshing sessions to deal with pressing issues as they arise. For a group of our size, we have surprisingly few conflicts that prevent us from uniting with Spirit. We embarked on a restructuring of committees this year that resulted in both merging and laying down of certain activities. It could have been a source of controversy, but it was done thoughtfully and gradually. This has resulted in a fuller understanding by Friends of the volunteer activities of the Meeting, and it has lessened the burden on Nominating to fill committee positions and clerkships.

**6. 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?**

Involvement in committees that support SCYM is a good way to be involved with other Friends.

Coming out of COVID, we are connected with more groups from outside of our Meeting and outside of SCYM. Zoom has made that more possible. We hear more about groups like QEW and FCNL. Intervisitation is important and this is a good development.

It has been many years since we've had a retreat led by an outside Friend. Those are always very special.

We now have a designated representative to our MLK Neighborhood Association and they're meeting in our Meeting House. We've also connected with other neighborhood groups. Our COVID relief fund was also a way that we connected with our neighbors.

We've refreshed our sign outside our Meeting House. It is now legible, and this may be the reason we've been having more visitors in worship.

We have some outreach through our Facebook page, which reports visitors, and we've been having regular inquiries via the forms on our website.

We've had many families from Los Amiguitos School, who rent space on the property, come and visit us. Taking inspiration from the Unity Through Creativity Foundation, we collectively made a wall-hanging, a "Singing Tree of Wholeness & Belonging", and we intentionally included both Los Amiguitos and Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera so that the three groups who share this property could get to know one another. The resulting wall-hanging was beautiful, as was the process of creation with others who share our values and our space.

We sent out a Stewardship letter. It's unclear whether it led to more donations, but it is a form of outreach. Finance & Stewardship hopes to work with Worship & Ministry to make our next letter both a fundraising appeal and an intentional form of outreach that includes news of ourselves.

#### **7. Membership Changes: How has our membership changed? How has this affected the life of our meeting?**

It's uncertain whether this query means "membership" in a formal sense, or members of our community. In the first, formal sense, we've had two new people join our Meeting and two people who moved away a while ago lay down their memberships. We're sorry to see those two Friends go, but we're very happy to welcome our two new members, who are already taking an active role in the life of the community. We wrote and distributed a new membership brochure this year, and hopefully this will help others seek formal membership. In the latter, informal sense, we've made an impressive comeback from COVID. Our experiments with hybrid/blended meetings allowed us to continue our practices and to come back quickly. Our level of diversity or lack thereof and our numbers are fairly similar to what they were before the pandemic. Austin is a very transitional place, and many people come and go. There is a core body of people, and a body of people who sojourn with us. Newer attenders report discussing among themselves a shared sense of being welcomed, feeling safe, and feeling like we offer a spiritual space that accepts participation at whatever level attenders are comfortable with. We've had several new babies born to people at Meeting, and they are a great source of joy. A project to create baby quilts resulted in Friends contributing hand-made decorated quilt squares, and another Friend sewed three quilts for the three newest members of our community.

#### **8. 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?**

Thanks to the ad-hoc Health Committee for keeping us healthy and recommending when to resume in-person meeting and the wearing of masks.

Thanks to the informal tech committee for its work. We have converted this to a formal committee.

For years, there was a concern about people being able to hear. A lot of work has been done on that. To a large extent, that problem has been solved through the good work and recommendations of our tech support group.

It's gratifying to see that the Meeting House is being used by other groups more now that the pandemic has abated somewhat.

There's a persistent concern about the absence of younger people. This question will be explored on a yearly meeting level. What do young people want and need? Why have they come to Quakerism? We are pleased to be getting younger people in the Meeting, but note that committee service still tends to be older folks. How can we help? What can we do to make it possible for younger Friends with young children to participate in the life of the Meeting?

**9. Racism: How has your meeting discerned its role in racism on an institutional systemic level and a personal level? Are there people of color that participate in the life of the meeting? How responsive has your meeting been to issues that predominately impact the people of color and/or been raised by people of color in your meeting?**

There are very few people of color in the Meeting. One Friend on the anti-racism group shared that we can only change ourselves, and try to be more welcoming. Do we ask people enough to participate in activities like the State of the Meeting Report discussions? Do we make the effort to really include people?

This is the third or fourth year of the anti-racism group that continues good work within the Meeting. They have reached out to City Council to encourage them to live up to promises made years ago in City Council Resolution 20210304-067, which among other things includes the statement that "The City Council of the City of Austin formally apologizes for its participation in the enslavement of Black people ...". We ask an anti-racism query at the beginning and end of each Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business: "How will [or how have] our decisions support[ed] our goal of becoming an anti-racist faith community?".

We are pleased to be part of the racially and ethnically diverse community of East Austin. However, we've had recent difficulties related to property boundaries. We've started trying to proactively reach out to our neighbors about fences and past damages to and uses of our property without permission. We've also had to ask one person – who happens to be of African heritage – not to be on the property due to concerning unsafe behaviors related to untreated mental health. In both cases, we've tried to be mindful of power, privilege, race, neighborliness, to emphasize behaviors rather than identities, and to hold everyone involved

in the Light. Still these events trouble us, and we seek to resolve all such potential disputes with love.

We have close ties with Colombia Ministry and Austin Tan Cerca de La Frontera, both of which work with people of color and of the global south. Our witness against the death penalty, which involves clemency letters, death row pen pals, and visitation by members, also predominantly impacts people of color. These are sustained and long-standing activities.

We still have much work to do.