

GUNPOWDER FRIENDS MEETING

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2020

Preparation of our Spiritual State of the Meeting report began with a gathering of 33 Gunpowder Friends via Zoom on 10th First Month 2021. Our sharing centered on three queries sent by Baltimore Yearly Meeting's Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee asking, in general terms, (1) how the Spirit prospers among us, (2) how Friends at Gunpowder Friends Meeting are supporting one another, and (3) how our spiritual life has been impacted by events of 2020.

In response to the third query, on spirituality, one Friend summarized spirituality as "finding ways to experience God in one another." This phrase goes a long way toward describing what our Meeting has been about both before and since the Covid-19 pandemic struck with full force in March, making worship and committee work dependent on videoconferencing into the present.

Thanks to the leadership of our clerk and standing committees, starting in March we found ways to continue our Quaker practices in virtual space via Zoom: Meetings for Worship, Meetings for Business, First Day School gatherings, committee meetings, Friendly Bible Study and a Richard Rohr discussion group, our Spiritual Formation program both large and small groups. We even found a way to continue our popular Coffee Social on the first First Day using small breakout rooms for informal conversation. Further, we've instituted some additional gathering times: a weekly Friendship Night for casual conversation, and a monthly Worshipful Conversation on race and racial justice.

A very rich addition to this year's spiritual journey together was provided by our Ministry and Counsel committee's choice of Marcelle Martin's book *Our Life is Love* for Meetingwide study. Copies of the book were mailed to 89 households and conversations planned over three Forums during the fall. Substantial and enthusiastic participation in these conversations has meant planning for an additional Forum early in 2021.

Having begun 2020 with a newly approved statement of our "Mission, Vision and Values," our Working Group on Stewarding our Vision guided us through a process of discerning our goals for its implementation. In two successive online retreats we listened deeply as Friends shared their hopes and Spirit's leadings. We felt a deep settling around a commitment to support the work of the McKim Community Center in Baltimore City. A proposal was to be put to Meeting for Business early in 2021 to establish a Working Group to explore and guide this work following the lead of the McKim community.

Several Friends remarked on the effort, hard work, and responsibility involved for all of us in going virtual and maintaining the practices that weave our community together—from setting up a Gunpowder Zoom account to convening meetings to becoming adept enough with the technology to attend evening meetings, some after long days of work-related videoconferencing. Yet despite the effort of going virtual, Friends commented that without our points of connection on Zoom, the isolation of the pandemic would have been even more difficult. As one Friend states, "I echo the immense gratitude to those who have stepped up to continue to weave us

together.” Indeed, technology has brought together not only current Gunpowder Friends (some of whom faced obstacles to in-person attendance even before Covid) but members, attenders, and visitors, including guests from across the country and the world. Although virtual meetings may not be optimal for most, some Friends have found them more personal than physically gathered groups, and many have expressed surprise at the richness of virtual meetings for worship. Yet another kind of effort must not be lost in all this—the efforts Gunpowder Friends have made to connect with those in our Meeting who are not comfortable using Zoom; the absence of these Friends from our shared life is palpable.

If spirituality involves finding ways to experience God or Spirit in one another, then Meetings for Worship provide space and time for encountering the Divine individually and corporately. *Connection* is a word associated with both physical proximity and the proximity technology fosters, and perhaps because our meetings have become technology dependent, many Friends described the experience of spirituality this year as a deep, nonphysical connection defined by welcome, acceptance, or love. As one Friend put it, “Being physically in the same space doesn’t have anything to do with our connecting spiritually.” Another Friend points out that from our separate Zoom squares we may be experiencing deep spiritual connection this year particularly because “the intensity of all our needs has been so much greater in 2020”—needs “for community, for acceptance, to give and receive love.”

Although many of us worship from home, from the time that safety protocols have allowed, some Gunpowder Friends each week have signed up to Zoom into worship from our building, sharing videos and photos as a visual anchor for the rest of us. Still, one Friend drew a parallel between our country Meetinghouse and George Fox’s characterization of church buildings as steeple houses. Fox and other early Friends asserted that encountering God did not depend on meeting in a steeple house, and so our Friend observed, “The pandemic has taught us that [encountering God or Spirit] is not about the steeple house, but it is about the community.”

In this same vein, another friend noted, “Community and Spirit overlap in a great way in our Meeting.” Whether through sharing insights from ancient and modern contemplative texts, through sending cards to Friends grieving, through journeying with a Friend facing open-heart surgery, in spending time with one another on the phone or outside on a porch, through picking up groceries for a quarantining Friend, or in “pulling on the strings of the universe to come together” as best we can to mourn the sudden death of a beloved Friend, the Spirit prospers in our Meeting as we find ways not only to experience one another but to extend generosity to one another and so to experience the generous gifts of God.

One Friend spoke of “tending the fire” and “rising from the ashes,” two Friends spoke of the ways they had found strength through their connection to a community of Friends who, when tested, dig deep and listen and share from the heart. One Friend who only started attending worship after we went virtual said, “One of the things I notice about this group is there is such a deep regard for each other. You can just feel it [in the] kindness and attentive listening.” We have been fortunate this year not only because we experience this generosity among ourselves but because we have been able to share what we can with the wider Quaker world.

Our younger Gunpowder Friends too have had an opportunity to share their thoughts about “how they feel loved and cared for by the Meeting community.” One Junior Young Friend expressed appreciation for “getting attention from grownups in the Meeting and feeling loved.” An older Young Friend said “we have a very, very accepting community. It is good to know that we will be accepted and loved for who we are no matter who we come to be.” Another spoke of being at Meeting is like being “pelted with pine cones of affection,” explaining a practice of leaving bunches of pine cones on a friend’s porch as a reminder of how much love comes her way. When asked about what they remember learning in First Day School lessons, one Young Friend said, “we talk about being kind” and remembered painting rocks with “kind words.” Even though it’s “one more screen,” Junior Young Friends and Young Friends still like coming to the monthly First Day School gatherings because “our friends are in the picture.”

As we looked to the future during our worship sharing on 10th First Month, some Friends recalled the past, before the pandemic—a New Year’s Day spent singing together, a night of sharing music at the meeting house, and the last Coffee Social gathering we enjoyed together. Zooming in from the Meetinghouse for our worship sharing, one Friend commented: “This little bottle of hand sanitizer has been here since our last coffee hour, which feels like a million years ago.” She went on to say that the bottle is a reminder for her “to be present in each moment.” It’s clear that our efforts to find ways of experiencing God in one another this year have strengthened our community. As future moments come, as the pandemic eases, and as what meetings look like changes, we want to welcome as many as want to join us in the year ahead.

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