

## Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2021

Gunpowder Friends gathered thoughts on the Spiritual State of our Meeting based on the queries provided by BYM's Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee by three methods: 32 Friends joined in a worship sharing session in January 2022, Young Friends and their families shared during their monthly Screen Time session, and members living at Broadmead were contacted individually.

We are not unique in the many challenges faced over the last two years—how to keep in touch when distanced by COVID-specific constraints, how and when to return to the Meeting House for worship and other functions, how to move forward into and plan for a future which still has many uncertainties. Yet, while our spirits are tried and at times shaken, the Spirit is strong among us. This is evidenced in the many ways we continue to care for one another as we wrestle openly, honestly, with patience and weariness in equal measure as we discern way forward in shaping the format for worship, in particular.

We began 2021 still in virtual space for worship and indeed all Meeting activities. Regular First Day Meeting for Worship was anchored by a rotating group of Friends who sat in the Meeting Room (masked and socially distanced) and sent a feed from there so that we all felt some connection to both each other and our sacred home. Some of us were joyfully surprised at the depth of worship available to us in the virtual space of our individual yellow boxes, others never found a meaningful connection in that format.

Late Spring brought soft weather, and we were able to begin meeting in person on the West Porch. One Friend described the “joy of the community [as] palpable,” when on Memorial Day we held our annual Meeting for Remembrance in person. Always a sweet time, this year it was blessed by the attendance of Lois Sexton, our beloved elder, who died just a few weeks later. Meetings have continued to be hybrid—with some Friends at the Meeting House in person, and some on Zoom. And in the Fall we instituted a midweek Meeting for Worship which is in-person only, not mediated by any technology. From one midweek Meeting for Worship a Friend recalled, “We gathered on the porch and the sun was setting and we began in light and ended in darkness and I look forward to May when we can do that again.”

However, many Friends in a variety of circumstances were not able to come in person, so we started a long round of experiments, led by our Committee on Ministry and Counsel, to explore a variety of worship formats. During this process Friends met for three listening sessions to discern Spirit's guidance and hear how these various ways of worship uphold values we hold dear but find the pandemic has brought into tension. On the one hand is the sacredness of including everyone however they are able to attend worship, in person or virtually, from near and far. On the other is the sacredness of the gathered community waiting on the Spirit in the peace of our historic Meeting Room, as one friend put it “developing a state of altered

consciousness” made possible by a “physiological response . . . the entrainment of our minds together,” or one might say, in response to a felt presence of Love.

Our challenge is to hold these values in creative tension as we seek workable solutions. One Friend encourages the “large mind” habit of holding two apparently opposing ideas as true. This antinomy brings discomfort at times or may even propel forward movement, but “it is a paradox that we have the strength to grapple with.” We are still in this experimentation mode, which has proven to be an even greater challenge than 100-percent virtual. And as one Friend reminds us, “though the pandemic has developed our patience as a meeting of the whole,” the struggle and pain of some “has been really heart-wrenching to watch.” Another Friend pointed out that we are a community that has demonstrated the “will to trust one another,” we are “cohesive” but stretched.

Amid these challenges, the life of the Meeting carried on in many fulfilling avenues. Each year our Meeting chooses a book for community-wide reading and reflection. At the start of 2021 we were still working with Marcelle Martin’s book *Our Life is Love*. We sent this book to all regular participants at Gunpowder Friends Meeting and were led through reflections on selected passages during several sessions of our Adult Forum. This year (2021–22) our “one book” is *Seeds That Change the World*, by Debbie Humphries.

Our Spiritual Formation (SF) program, modeled and led by the BYM SF program, is a rich source of reading Quaker and other spiritual sourcebooks, fellowship in the monthly dinner gatherings with worship sharing around a chosen text, deep sharing in small groups and enriched coming together in “that which is eternal.” In short it is in many ways an important aspect of what forms, shapes and grows our community. Not a few Friends first came to Gunpowder Friends Meeting through the SF program.

Just as the virus hit and lockdown landed us all into new realities (Spring 2020), we concluded a series of retreats to create a statement of our Meeting’s Mission, Vision, and Values. In the final retreat of that work, occurring 100-percent virtually, we came to a very deep unity on the priorities which would guide our work, our mission, for the near future. This year one of those priorities has come to fruition in the formation of the McKim-Gunpowder Partnership Working Group. In July our Meeting hosted the McKim summer camp for three days of fun, games, learning, engagement— and JOY! The leadership of McKim, teens and adults, returned in the Fall using the quiet space here for planning and enrichment. And we celebrated with McKim their 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, coinciding with Gunpowder Friends Meeting’s 200years at our current location on the hill in Sparks, MD. This Partnership Working Group continues to meet monthly to plan for future partnering in McKim’s long history of providing support for the young people of Baltimore City.

This year has also seen our community embrace the next steps in bringing Mission, Vision, and Values Statement to life. Creation of the Mission statement actually began 4 years ago when questions were raised about how we steward our resources, specifically our financial investments. In order to determine how we *spend* our money we need to know how we *think* about our money. Therefore, we determined that we need a long-range financial plan, and we need to develop it in a Spirit-led community process. To that end, we have engaged a consultant from the Center for Action and Contemplation. In the coming months she will lead three communitywide retreats in which we will examine and, hopefully, adopt a plan for stewarding our financial resources. This plan will enable us to look to other long-term goals, so this is an exciting time for us.

One of the big losses mentioned by both Young Friends (YFs) and adults is the loss of the presence of YFs in the Meeting House. We have Screen Time once a month to stay in touch, play some games, and have an occasional lesson. During one of these sessions, we had a conversation with YFs and their parents about what is important about their connection to GFM and how we can best meet their needs. The YFs said they missed being at the Meeting House because they don't get to really know people or meet new Friends, and that their place in the community is important to them. They all really love the big gatherings we host for them at the meadow (up country space with woods and stream). We do these 3–4 times a year usually around the holidays—picnics, Easter egg hunts, costume parties, all great fun. The older YFs also get involved in service projects like our support of the local food bank and clothes closet.

Lastly, we will share responses to the query regarding T-shirt designs and slogans. Maybe we should have started here because many jumped right to it and loved the question. One, that got a lot of laughs and felt true to our experience states, “You’re on MUTE!” Others both captured a lighter side and also real feelings about our community:

- “e spiritus unum” (out of Spirit, One)
- “Simply. Love. Gunpowder.”
- “Love before Belief”
- A beacon of light attracting all seekers
- Gunpowder is like a charging station. I plug in on the computer or in -person, and out pours all this love and energy. I am recharged
- from a YF, a rainbow and a heart
- and another YF, “Peace” or a dove and the “Quaker Star” (AFSC)