

Gunpowder Friends Meeting Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2023

Our community met in March to engage with three queries in a worship sharing format in preparation for writing our Spiritual State of the Meeting report. These queries were adapted from the queries sent by Baltimore Yearly Meeting in order to take into account our Meeting's specific concerns.

- What are the best practices of your meeting's Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business that you could share with other meetings? In what way do you think your Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business falls short?
- For several years our meeting has been fairly inwardly focused. What avenues of ministry and peacemaking have we missed due to this focus around our worship format? How does our meeting practice this peace testimony?
- Tell us how your meeting's walk with Spirit informs your understanding of racism and how you are meant to live.

** In addition our Working Group on Racial Reconciliation will prepare an addendum detailing our activities around healing racism as requested by Baltimore Yearly Meeting.

The worship sharing was attended by 23 Friends. Additionally, members of Ministry and Counsel contacted Gunpowder Friends meeting at Broadmead and young Friends from our meeting for their input. Members of Ministry and Counsel then worked collaboratively to form a draft which received first and second readings at Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business.

As we reflect on the Spiritual state of our Meeting, we are clear that Meetings for Worship at Gunpowder Friends are frequently characterized by deep silence and seasoned ministry. It is not unusual to hear ministry taking the shape of imagery, story and song. At the rise of Meeting, the joyful excitement of greeting one another is often great enough that it is difficult for the Meeting to settle again for announcements, etc. We are a beloved community both in Worship and our daily lives.

As we began to look at the queries given us by our Yearly Meeting, several Friends addressed the query on Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business. Attendance is usually strong at our Monthly Meetings often including many of the same Friends who frequently attend Meeting for Worship. Our practice of leaving the technology bridge open for Friends who are unable to be present in person, to attend to our business remotely has encouraged those Friends' participation in Meeting-wide concerns.

Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business have, however, fallen short on some occasions. One Friend observed that these Meetings have fallen short because difficult questions and issues such as worship formats and allocation of financial resources are often referred to committees and therefore not given the entire Meeting's deep focus which those issues may deserve. Committees season these matters and return them to the full Meeting for discernment. The belief that our Meeting as a whole is capable of wrestling with difficult

issues in Meeting for Business is grounded in the belief that our community is rooted in love and compassion for one another.

One hurdle we face is the tension between what one Friend described as “plain speech and reticence.” The former being motivated by the need for honesty and the latter by kindness. This tension has at times made periods of discernment contentious but has also clarified the issues within our Meeting that have required deeper focus, leading to our well-attended weekend-long retreat led by an outside facilitator.

One Friend offered the aphorism that “we don’t get together to do the work, we do the work so that we can get together”. Our efforts at community building, learning to listen to one another, and being present for Friends with whom we may disagree, but are willing to hear, are the tools suggested for addressing conflict as we do our meeting’s business together.

The past several years, since returning to the Meeting House following the pandemic, Gunpowder has been struggling to come to terms with the changes brought by the introduction of technology to much of our shared life. We all learned that there are both blessings and challenges in this encounter. Some find it a boon to be able to welcome distant or homebound Friends to worship through a technology “bridge.” Others find the presence of technology in the Meeting Room an insurmountable obstacle to settled worship. For this reason, during most of 2023, 3-12 Friends gathered on First Day in the Meeting Room at 8:30 a.m. for deep, Spirit-led, technology-free worship. Another alternative, which continues at the 10am hour, is worship on the porch. Some Friends enjoy this option year-round and others only in “soft” weather.

One Friend commented on “the enormous amount of loving energy [that] has been placed on peacekeeping [around]...the issue of how we worship together.” Yet we are aware that there is still healing that needs to be done. And the ongoing unsettledness continues to cause harm in that some Friends are not currently worshipping at Gunpowder.

One of the efforts to restore communication, peace and depth of connection was to bring an outside facilitator, Christopher Sammond, of the School of the Spirit, to Gunpowder to lead a weekend retreat in early December. It was well attended, well received and Friends generally felt the retreat “nourished [our] roots as we sat in silence with one another... in silence we go into our hearts to be open and that flowered here with Christopher.” But nearly three years into this struggle, as one Friend put it, “It is time to stop the harm.” And another, “our growth edge is to lean into hard conversations.”

Two committees, Ministry and Counsel and Care and Oversight have worked in the past to provide listening sessions, threshing sessions, and clearness sessions, and will continue working to find next steps. We are aware that some of the work can be addressed by the community as a whole, but some is individual and may need to be addressed in one-on-one conversations with facilitation offered as needed. A Friend asked about available resources for people who may have “felt harmed in the process of these past few years, things that might have been said or taken as hurtful...what paths of reconciliation, for being heard, for

peacemaking concretely are available?” This is the work at hand and these two committees will continue to care for this work in tenderness.

One of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting’s queries asked us to look at how Spirit informs our understanding of racism and how we are meant to live. While an ad hoc committee at Gunpowder Friends Meeting has worked for a number of years to bring forums and initiate discussions, this past year we formalized this group into the Working Group on Racial Reconciliation. (The addendum prepared earlier by the Working Group on Racial Reconciliation for Baltimore Yearly Meeting Working Group on Racism is attached.)

Gunpowder Friends continue to take concerns presented by persistent racism seriously. We have been troubled by some of the Yearly Meeting’s approach to “anti-racism” work, which has sometimes caused harm and alienation within the community. We turned to a different approach from a seasoned activist, Kazu Haga, founding director of the East Point Peace Academy in Oakland, California. This year’s one book, gifted to everyone in our community, was Haga’s book Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm. Reading this together, we have focused not on shaming, punishing, or eradicating racism, but rather on building beloved community, following the radical teachings of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

We believe that what we spend energy on will flourish. We work on what we want to grow, so our working group is titled “Working Group on Racial Reconciliation.” We also learned that the Wisdom Project, based at our sister organization The McKim Center, with whom we have an ongoing relationship, was reading the Haga book simultaneously. This synchronicity, we felt, was further confirmation of Haga’s loving and constructive approach to serious conflict. As an activist working inside federal prisons, Kazu Haga’s work is deeply grounded in praxis.

In keeping with this focus on peaceability in the context of beloved community, we have also begun to cultivate a relationship with the Baltimore Peace Movement (previously, Baltimore Ceasefire), with whom one of our members has a long and deep relationship. We note the Movement’s practical success in bringing the city’s homicide rate down by 20%. We have invited one of the movement’s founders, Letrice Gant, to speak at our February 2024 Forum. We hope to foster connections among Gunpowder Meeting, the Baltimore Peace Movement, and the McKim Center, again following the loving Kingian approach to nonviolent community-building elucidated in Kazu Haga’s work.

As we close one year and move toward the next, we note that while attending to inward facing work we have not forgotten the call to “do justice.” Our partnership with McKim seeks to strengthen community and families in the heart of Baltimore. We continued work to settle refugee families through our partnership with International Rescue Committee’s Welcome Home Project, provided local emergency assistance through United Churches Assistance Network, and supported vulnerable families through the North Baltimore County Food Bank.