Midlothian Friends Meeting

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report – 2021

People move in and out of our lives like a stream flowing in different directions, but at Midlothian Friends Meeting we are bound by and follow one stream, one Spirit. We accept each other wherever we are and cherish our differences as we grow in this Spirit. Being together in community seems to be the ticket to the outflowing of the heart with which we face issues.

The pandemic continued to be a challenge to the way we worship and communicate. We spent part of the year worshipping solely on Zoom and the other using a hybrid form of worship that includes both Zoom and in-person participation. One of our greatest joys has been the ability to finally return to worshipping in person after a long hiatus. In addition, technology obtained during the pandemic, which includes a television screen and Meeting Owl, enables those at a distance and those still uncomfortable meeting in person to participate in many activities. We believe that gathering as one meeting is better than splitting into two (one on Zoom and one in person) because we are one spiritual community following one Spirit.

We were able to adapt quickly during the pandemic because we are flexible and not "rule-bound". It seems the Spirit may have prepared us for the changes necessitated by COVID. We knew we needed to let go of certain traditions (refreshments, in-person worship, pot-luck dinners, and other social events) as well as look for new methods (technological and other) to enable us to continue as an active spiritual community. This transition went surprisingly smoothly.

We have to face that COVID is here to stay and need to plan how we can continue to meet when infection rates spike. We are challenged to take advantage of periods of low contagion to sponsor in-person events. The creation of a special committee to help make decisions in a timely manner helped us navigate the issues of closing meeting during the pandemic and will serve us in the future.

We discovered exciting new opportunities to join groups on Zoom. This has been enriching and inclusive for some who would not otherwise have been part of a group, for example, Peace and Social Action, the Racial Justice Study Group, Book Group, and other groups that are offshoots of MFM. To quote a Zoom participant in our Peace and Social Action Committee, “because participation became more accessible through Zoom, I have found it fun, joyful, deep, and consciousness-raising. I feel the loving support of others.”

MFM provides a beautiful, peaceful venue for outdoor retreats or quiet contemplation. We are grateful for our Meditation Garden and for the work done to rejuvenate and beautify it during the last year. The use of decorative rocks lining the paths and entrances conveys a sense of timelessness that is a reminder of the timelessness of Light and Love in our lives. We have also established an above-ground vegetable garden, which our children delight in maintaining. The joy of seeing the Spirit working in them as they care for the garden and witness the results of their efforts is rewarding and inspiring. In many ways, our kids act as ambassadors of our meeting, take pride in doing so, and have a lot of fun in the process.

One of the most amazing stories of the past year pertains to the Thrifty Quaker, a thrift store associated with MFM whose proceeds provide grants to deserving charities each month. We thought the store would need to close during the pandemic, but, instead, it has received nearly 3 times its average pre-

pandemic income. It was also able to increase the number of charities receiving grants each month. As an example, the Thrifty Quaker was recently able to grant more than $4000 to each of two charities providing assistance to Ukrainian refugees.

Grants have also been provided by Friend$hare, a program of MFM that provides emergency financial assistance to individuals recommended by trusted sources. Recently, Friend$hare provided grants to undocumented immigrants going through the immigration process.

Another example of the Meeting's commitment to immigrants is Peter Farago, a member of our Peace and Social Action Committee. Peter works as a volunteer with the Immigration Legal Services Program at the Sacred Heart Center in Richmond. He is authorized by the US Department of Justice to provide legal advice on immigration matters to clients and represent them before the Department of Homeland Security and its agencies. He is applying for additional authorization to represent clients in Immigration Court. Peter also developed and maintains the transportation scheduling system used by the Central Virginia Sanctuary Network, a project of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy.

We routinely allow nonprofit organizations to use our meetinghouse free of charge. For instance, the Sacred Heart Center, a charity that provides adult education and support to the local Latino Community, has used our meetinghouse for its retreats.

We are thankful for our Racial Justice Study Group, which helps us to increase our understanding and inclusivity of other races and ethnicities. In addition to conducting regular book discussions, the group sponsored a visit to the Richmond Slave Trail, which provides stark evidence of the consequences of racism. We are also participating in the Powhatan Coalition of Churches and have a designated representative keeping in touch with them. The coalition includes a diverse array of church congregations and has been very helpful in taking us out of our "Quaker bubble". We hope to continue and expand these relationships. We want to visit people of color where they are, rather than wait for them to come to us. Our challenge is to find ways to put our learnings into action.

We care for our older, physically challenged Friends by providing transportation to and from meeting for those unable to drive. Each Friend is important to us, and we gladly do whatever is needed to make sure all who wish to attend are able to do so.

Special credit is due Laura Clark, who faithfully leads our Young Friends as part of our Religious Education program. She approaches teaching with a steady and giving heart. Her love for the children is apparent in all she does, and she inspires the kids with fun, creative projects. Liz Wall is our newly designated RE Coordinator and works closely with Laura in planning curricula and new activities that will instruct, inspire, and appeal to the children.

A formidable challenge last year was the absence of children at meeting because of restrictions imposed by COVID. Children do not like using Zoom and their interests are different from adults, so we had difficulty finding ways for them to participate and still be safe. We appreciate Zoom but admit it is not the same as meeting in person, especially for children.

We were also challenged to "Love Our Neighbors - No Exceptions" during the pandemic when many people, locally and nationally, failed to heed public health recommendations. However, the experience has helped all of us to gain wisdom and reflect on our assumptions and prejudices.

One Friend opened our eyes to Paul Cuffe, an African American Quaker abolitionist and activist who did amazing things. This led us to reevaluate our approach to Quaker history and to include more articles and books in our library pertaining to African American Quakers and their contributions. Whereas a few years ago, our library contained few such books, we now have books on Paul Cuffe, Bayard Rustin, and other African American Quakers. A telling incident occurred when an African American visitor to MFM became immediately attracted to a picture and article on Bayard Rustin in our library. This helped us realize that we need to continue to widen our representation of minorities in the life of our meeting. We have also added books on Benjamin Lay, who was only 4 feet tall and had other physical difficulties yet was a powerful humanitarian and abolitionist.

MFM sent a representative to a recent BYM Financial Planning meeting in which the guiding question was "How does our use of finances reflect our racial inclusion?" We were appalled to hear of serious racial incidents that allegedly occurred at some of the Quaker camps. An African American participant at the financial meeting asked what individual meetings are doing to alleviate racial tension and to promote inclusion and love. We wonder if we are doing enough and are not sure how to address this completely, though we know there are tangible things we can do and have done. But talk is not enough.

The idea of a slogan for our meeting is intriguing, and we came up with several possibilities that represent who we are:

- Love Thy Neighbors – No Exceptions
- Way Opens (with a picture of an open door and light coming in)
- Breathe
- Open heartedness
- Slowing Down
- Quietness
- A picture of rocks with no slogan
- No slogan or picture, in keeping with Quaker simplicity and silence

Much has happened and is happening at Midlothian Friends Meeting. But the Spirit that is streaming in the hearts of individual Friends and in the gathered meeting that is Midlothian Friends keeps us centered in love and commitment to one another and to the communities we live in.