

Midlothian Friends Meeting

2020 Spiritual State of the Meeting Report

This past year, the Covid pandemic presented us with many challenges, but by answering the Spirit's call and following its agenda, we turned it into an opportunity to connect with others in new ways. Early in the pandemic, Friends contributed money to fund everything we needed to purchase equipment and services to renovate the meetinghouse for safety and to establish Zoom access. We were all in agreement on this expensive effort and made it happen quickly, which is unusual with Quaker decisions.

The saying, "never waste a good crisis," might describe how we approached the pandemic. Our ability to reach out to others has improved. Some Friends who might not have walked into the meetinghouse did visit through Zoom. Because of COVID-19 we learned that if we "play the hand we are dealt", Grace is always there to help. The use of Zoom during this time has been so successful that we plan to continue it in conjunction with in-person worship after the pandemic, which will result in permanent, positive changes to the way we worship and make decisions. Some Friends have already found a unique way to worship by using Zoom on their phones while they stroll the beautiful meetinghouse grounds.

One new Friend (a self-described "newbie") said he liked what he had read about Quakers but was hesitant to attend in person. When he finally connected via Zoom to our discussion group, Circle of Friends, he immediately felt accepted. Everyone he encountered was transparent, real, and welcoming. He has since been attending this discussion group regularly.

Spirit prospers and is palpable at Midlothian Friends Meeting (MFM), especially when we slow down, intentionally focus on the Light, and cease trying to be in control. Though this is an ongoing process, and we are still learning to pause, we find it to be a powerful aid in making decisions affecting our meeting. The Spirit does not need our protection, but it does need our willingness to listen. At MFM, we endeavor always to listen. To us, "protecting" the Spirit might better be called "extending" the Spirit.

One Friend contracted COVID-19. She lives alone and at times has not felt much connection to a community. During her illness, though, Midlothian Friends provided an outpouring of support, sending cards and e-mails, and making phone calls. In a sense, COVID-19 made her feel connected again. The show of caring was special.

This ability to share with and support one another is not new. A long-time Friend remembered when she, too, was a newcomer. She felt welcomed as if she had found a new home. Since then, she has been in and out of Meeting physically at times, but her spiritual connection has always remained strong. Though she goes through phases, she says the Spirit of Meeting is always there to welcome and support her. She feels protected by the help she has received from Friends and cherishes that. Friends have helped her even when they didn't know they were helping.

Conflict is minimal at MFM. If there are differences among us, we try to see them from the other's perspective and find ways to resolve them with love and understanding. We have found that when conflict is ignored, it can fester, and we try to deal with conflict in a straightforward and positive way. That said, few have experienced conflicts and many are unaware of any that have taken place.

We do acknowledge that conflict sometimes arises from not being able to meet in person because there is not the same personal connection. There are shortcomings arising from using Zoom, e-mails, and texting. We may tend to be more impulsive and less reflective when using these means of communication. When we are unable to meet in person, we try to use technology sparingly and mindfully, especially when making decisions affecting the Meeting.

During the pandemic, we may have unintentionally lost touch with Friends who prefer not to, or are unable to, use technology to connect. Though some of these Friends have expressed the desire to return when the pandemic eases, we have not heard from others. We are still not sure why they have dropped out. It may be fine to celebrate our successes, but we wonder why some Friends aren't around anymore.

In 2020, we “have kept on truckin’.” We have had to adjust to a new reality, but we have benefited as well. We approach everything with love and compassion from a secure spiritual grounding. There is always someone to bring us back to a spiritual place. We aspire to be apolitical and inclusive in our outreach to others.

Our strong spiritual core continues to evolve through frequent, regular, and planned communication with groups gathering on Zoom. This has led to conversations, for example, on racial inequality and fallout from the Presidential election. Peace and justice drive our decisions and help us to accept others and understand their views when they join in discussions.

With so many things going on in the world, it is easy to get distracted from personal growth. But our weekly discussion group, Circle of Friends, helps Friends get in touch with their spiritual and emotional lives. Many have found new insights and connections by engaging in these discussions. Others count on Circle of Friends for spiritually driven discussions that help us reframe social and political events to better understand the deep divisions in our country and the world.

At MFM, there is Spirit within and Spirit without. Our spiritual introspection serves as a springboard to action because we believe that action is the antidote to despair. Action at MFM manifests in our thrift store, The Thrifty Quaker, which helps the community by providing low cost, quality goods and by supporting local charities. We have also reached out to those affected by the pandemic, started a study group on racial equity in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, sponsored a committee for sanctuary and immigration reform, and maintained past connections through a book club and Zoom calls. In December, we approved *A Minute on the Abolition of the Death Penalty*, which we shared with other groups, including the Coalition of Powhatan (County) Churches. Gratifyingly, Virginia has just abolished the death penalty.

Our connections through Meeting allow us to spend time thinking about other peoples’ interior and spiritual lives. The value of private contemplation is aided by experiencing a little slice of the interior life of other Friends. Having “a slice of you and you having a slice of me” provides us with a better awareness of others and brings us together in a way that would not be possible if we viewed others as a bunch of separate black boxes.

Thankfulness for our Quaker Meeting abounds. It remains a place for Spiritual growth not found anywhere else. MFM is a centering community. It allows us to try things that are scary, to not give up, to embrace others despite any idiosyncrasies, to practice sharing a higher ideal of Being, and to help us on our Spiritual journey.

Breaking the rules when necessary to bring people together is part of our meeting.