



Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
of the Religious Society of Friends

Southern Quarter: State of the Meeting Reports Received

Written on: JULY 27, 2021

Chester River Monthly Meeting

How have we sustained our commitment to be a covenant spiritual community during this past year?

Chester River Friends Meeting has experienced a rather steady decline in active membership over the last decade. Much of this loss was attributed to 1) the deaths of many Members 2) a growing number of older Members developed an inability to attend Meeting for Worship 3) several Members were responsible for aging family members and therefore unable to attend Meeting 4) several Members relocated out of the area and 5) several Members and Attenders gravitated to a rather vibrant Unitarian Fellowship.

Interestingly, the Unitarian Fellowship started forming in our Meeting House many years ago and when, coincidentally a founding member of our Meeting, no longer in attendance died, he left his entire estate to the Unitarian Fellowship. This enabled the Unitarians to purchase property and build their own Fellowship Hall. Another interesting phenomenon, over the past decade or perhaps quite a bit longer, was

several younger families, both Members and Attenders, interested in Religious Education for their children, left the Meeting's struggling First Day School Program to a bit more vibrant one at the Unitarian Fellowship.

So, considering the above, our Members began a rather lengthy discernment process, perhaps two years ago, to arrive at an understanding of what we might look like in the future and how we might be prepared personally, as a community and financially to be adequate stewards of our Meeting House building and property, knowing as well that we also have responsibility for the management and upkeep of the Cecil Burial Ground. Several Members suggested an initial appraisal and a building inspection and eventually way opened for these to be accomplished. Still, there was considerable concern, in spite of declining revenue and looming major repairs, identified in the building inspection, to move to any next step.

Before the Pandemic, our weekly attendance for Meeting for Worship hovered around 6-7 Members and an occasional Attender. This had been our situation for several years or more. Another Interesting phenomenon, an Insight Meditation Group, under the leadership of one of our few birthright Quakers, now also a Community Dharma Leader, was expanding exponentially, occupying the building for three meditations per week and numerous all-day meditations throughout the year. We were grateful to share our space and their donations, financially and their physical labor on workdays, were sustaining and fantastic.

After the Pandemic, as we reckoned with the absence of the Insight Meditation Group, our own wonders about the safety of Meeting for Worship, even with social distancing and adequate ventilation, an offer to purchase the Meeting House and property arrived in the mail from our next door neighbor. In many ways, this was an answer to our prayers. All, previously hesitant Members, stated so in our Meeting for Business to address our neighbors offer and Sense of the Way Forward for Our Meeting. The sale was completed on January 22, 2021.

So, how do I answer this query? I believe that we were galvanized by our worship, our discernment and even our losses over the past several years so that we were able to collectively and spiritually sustain our Quaker community.

What have been the joys and the learnings of this past year and where have we encountered challenges?

I think that I may have answered this query in the rather lengthy epistle above. Yet, I believe on reflection here today, that our struggles with the challenges of this past year have “galvanized” us both individually and collectively as Quakers. Therefore, we can meet anywhere in the Light and reflect these joys to one another and in turn, to our larger community. Perhaps, as an old saying goes, “We have laid our burdens down”.

How has our faith supported our social witness?

Friends often, over the years, some, not particularly with fondness, spoke of our Meeting as one that was “quiet and retiring”. True, many fabulous and “weighty” Quakers did retire to Chestertown and to the Chester River Friends Meeting. Some had laid down their activism and yet their Faith with a “quiet” Practice was never in “retirement”. While other Friends, retiring to Chestertown and leaning, perhaps more heavily on their activism, often bludgeoned, my word, the Meeting with their concerns and our “quiet” Practice.

Personally speaking, this led to some personal struggle and conflict with other Quakers until, I was fortunate to be a resident student at Pendle Hill. There, I recognized that my own Faith and indeed my Practice was as a Contemplative. I have wondered over the years about this Faith and Practice dilemma and its impact on the Monthly Meeting, the Yearly Meeting and the Religious Society of Friends as a whole. Oh, how I digress, and yet this has even greater relevance today as we face even more challenges in our daily lives and as members of our communities. At Chester River Meeting currently, I think that members social witness grows as a

result of their Quaker faith and practice. We regularly listen to one another, support one another's leadings and individually and collectively donate to our community.

How have our community members supported one another?

Due to our small numbers for Meeting for Worship, adequate space, ventilation and masking, we have been able to meet for worship throughout the pandemic at the Meeting House until the sale. The Presbyterian Church in Chestertown has provided us the use of their Board Room and this as well seems a safe space to continue our Meeting for Worship. Foundationally, our Meeting for Worship is the keystone of our support for one another. Our Clerk publishes regular minutes of our activities and offerings. Also, it was no small task to prepare our Meeting House for the sale. Many Members worked countless hours finding homes for our furniture, kitchen appliances, dishes and silverware, our First Day School furniture, books, art supplies, etc. Following our final Meeting for Worship in the Meeting House, we cleaned the building from top to bottom and I commented later, this experience felt like a Meeting for Worship with a focus on Cleaning. Often, I wonder if being a small unprogrammed Quaker Meeting, with a few people taking all the responsibilities for all the committees, we might miss some opportunities to support and care for Members and Attenders who drift away for one reason or another. Under the pandemic and the sale of our Meeting House, I believe our challenges have been intensified to be of care and support to one another. This concern, I will carry forward to our Ministry and Care Committee.

What has transpired since this initial writing of 8 February 2021?

This attempt at speaking to, writing about, the Spiritual State of the Chester River Friends Meeting was sent to all Members and active Attenders via email. Overall, it was favorably received with no objections or additions. As Chester River was hosting Southern Quarterly Meeting in the month of March, it was decided that this writing would be our State of the Meeting report. This, therefore, was read by this writer to approximately 50 gathered Friends over Zoom on 21 March 2021. An

interesting observation, after listening to the other State of the Meeting reports, was that, with the exception of Third Haven, the other Meetings seem to share the challenges of declining Membership and yet, a firmness of the Spirit in the Members remaining. All in all, the presence of the pandemic was an obvious challenge to everyone and yet in the reports of the Meetings and of several individual Members, this presence was also an opportunity to find deeper meaning, individually and collectively, in our Quaker Faith and Practice.

Third Haven Monthly Meeting

Worship Summary

In a year like no other, Third Haven Friends Meeting quickly embraced the new reality of the COVID pandemic and its consequences. With the help of computer communications technology, Friends dedicated themselves to the task of finding new and innovative ways to stay connected. We started Zoom meetings in February and successfully combined both Zoom and live in-person worship, in hybrid meetings, during the warmer months. We briefly opened our 1684 meetinghouse in September and October, before the pandemic surged again. Safety remains our number one priority, as we carefully follow our Talbot County Health Department's guidelines, frequently speaking to local public health officials for advice. So far, we have been able to continue in-person Wednesday evening meetings for worship, in our brick meetinghouse with only 5-6 Friends gathering at that time, following social distancing and mask guidelines. The Wednesday meetings are also held virtually simultaneously. At this point, we realize that some of our members and attenders do not feel comfortable on (Zoom) virtual platforms or meeting in person. We continue to develop and implement innovative ways to keep as many people as possible connected and engaged in the Meeting.

Third Haven Committee Work

Pastoral Care

At the beginning of the pandemic, our Pastoral Care Committee increased its efforts to contact members and attenders on a regular basis. Every person was asked what their needs were, how we could help, and what type of contact they felt comfortable with. A variety of responses helped direct us towards individualizing services (how one to call, how much tech help needed, etc.). The Committee focused on people with serious health problems and their caregivers, families schooling from home, and Friends in social isolation. We are constantly reevaluating our outreach in the Meeting efforts to keep our Friends engaged while being sensitive to meet them "where they are." See the attached Pastoral Care Committee Annual Report.

Worship and Ministry

The core value of the Meeting is supporting spiritual growth. Our Meeting is known for its deep listening and Spirit-led vocal ministry. Worship and Ministry worked hard to keep the sense of the Divine alive and present during these changing times. We have had discussions about how hard it is to center on Zoom versus when we are together in each other's physical presence. We realize the experiences are not the same. The Committee continues traditional practices of greeting people to worship, reading the queries and offering guided meditation and readings groups. In December, along with Pastoral Care, Worship, and Ministry Committee started special services for "Healing: Holding others in the Light" on Zoom. See the attached Worship and Ministry Committee Annual Report.

Testimonies and Concerns

The ways this year has affected our day-to-day activism has been profound. We have all found it frustrating to be cut off from our usual volunteer work and social outreach. The Committee held several meetings discussing engagements in important issues and found ways to contribute back to our community and to Quaker organizations. We are currently engaging with a group from Baltimore Yearly Meeting to address issues presented to the Maryland General Assembly, most specifically environmental issues. Many of us continued our individual efforts including working locally on social justice issues, income and racial inequities, homelessness, meatpacking workers, and nature sanctuaries. One special project this year has been to help a historic African American "sister" church, Asbury United Methodist Church in Easton MD, rebuild its soup kitchen for community use. Our efforts are going well so far. The Committee also allocates funding from our Shoffner Educational fund in international outreach. We have helped pay a Bolivian Quaker's way through her medical school. The Committee publishes an annual Giving Guide to help Friends donate to worthy groups at year's end.

First Day School

What a big change this year has been for our families and small children. Children and their parents' lives have changed drastically. First Day School (FDS) has managed to stay in touch with families by Zoom, by sharing resources, and by Godly

Play lessons. We delivered games, such as Fox and Fell in the spring, sent families age-appropriate anti-racist books and lessons, had a virtual pizza party, and even decorated Christmas wreaths for Meeting. During Advent, we held a “Reverse Advent” activity and collected much-needed food and personal items for a local service center. First Day School continues to be amazing in their innovation and connection during most challenging conditions.

Property and Grounds

Our hoped-for plans of expansion and renovation have been temporarily tabled. The silver lining in this allows us to carefully plan needed repairs on the 1684 Meeting House. We have located talented craftsmen skilled in historic buildings to help ensure quality preservation work. We continue holding periodic workdays on the property because outdoor activities with social distancing is safe and fun!

Queries for Other Meetings

Everyone misses our in-person worship and wonderful hospitality meet. We long for the good food and companionship. With zoom, we hold “breakout rooms” at the end of meeting for worship. This helps give us some of the more intimate conversations we all miss. How are other Meetings filling the hospitality problem?

We are constantly trying to improve our technology, communications, and connections. Have other meetings found technological tools and methods that they really like?

We are not really doing outreach now but have considered making outreach part of other committees such as Pastoral Care. What are other Meetings doing?

We have considered bringing Hospitality into Pastoral Care as well. Have other meetings thought of this? Could Hospitality along with Pastoral Care help with meals to families?

What are other Meetings doing with their library? Are you lending books?

Finally, there are many blessings to be appreciated from this past year:

1. As Friends, we enjoy quiet and solitude. That has come in handy this year.
 2. Struggling with technology and communications together can strengthen new friendships.
 3. Asking people what they are “comfortable” with is a new way of being kind.
 4. Being in Community is invaluable and being in community in difficult times is precious.
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Wicomico River Monthly Meeting

2020 was challenging, with the pandemic and consequent suspension of MFW in person, as well as losing long time 2 active members. But despite all, our small Meeting has strengthened our feelings of connection and support.

We have learned that we can work together to find solutions to challenges, such as figuring out how to meet online and also include the Meeting space. We also have experienced new joys together: a field trip to a farm with baby goats; and singing Christmas carols online with another Meeting.

We organize a yearly event in our city park to honor the International Day of Peace that brings together numerous nonprofit organizations. This year we also increased donations to our local Food Bank. We continue to participate in local, national and international volunteer organizations, including the FGC, Friends Journal, FCNL, AFSC.

We held a large, outdoor, warm, heartfelt and even humorous memorial service for a dear member who died. We continue to share news and concerns every week after MFW.