

## **A Time to Refrain from Embracing Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting's Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2020**

This has been a challenging year for Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting, as we struggled to respond faithfully to the global pandemic, ongoing murders of Black citizens by the police, and an increasingly polarized political climate. With the outside world changing so rapidly, many of us found it difficult at times to stay grounded enough to discern how Spirit was leading us. Fortunately, we were able to lean on one of our biggest strengths: each other.

When things are going well, it can be easy to think of community as a nice thing to have: pleasant, not too onerous, a background hum in our busy lives. This year has awakened us to the fact that community is not just pleasant, it is essential. In hard times, we turn to Spirit and to each other. By this measure, we can say that Spirit has been at work among us this year, and that even as we grieve our losses, we also celebrate the precious ways the pandemic has knitted us together. When we look around at our community, we see the many ways that Love has manifested among us. What follows are just a few examples.

### **Our Pandemic Response**

When the pandemic began, we immediately closed the meetinghouse and moved all meeting activities online. Our Worship & Ministry Committee worked quickly to figure out how best to recreate and support our worship online. A number of Friends brought their knowledge and gifts to the technical aspects of worship over Zoom; others helped technology-challenged Friends access our virtual meetings. As the demand for technical help continued month after month, it placed a strain on this small group of volunteers, and we are realizing that we will need additional support to meet our ongoing need for technical services in 2021.

Our Office and Property Committees kept on top of conflicting and ever-changing safety guidance and restrictions from all levels of government. Our tireless newsletter editors ramped up our communications significantly to circulate timely information and Zoom links. The Meeting's clerk convened an Ad Hoc COVID Response Committee, consisting of committee clerks as well as individuals with relevant expertise. This group met biweekly and then on an as-needed basis to make decisions about safety and pandemic response that couldn't wait until business meeting. This group was guided by the principle of an organic response, with individuals and committees being attentive to Spirit and to our community to discern what felt safe and what felt necessary as the situation evolved.

### **Our Worship**

To the surprise of some among us, we found that online worship, though not the same as in-person worship, does work and can even be gathered. We were delighted to have members and attenders return to worship whom we had not seen in many years because they now live at a distance or were physically unable to join us at the meetinghouse. From our computer screens, we were able to welcome Friends from overseas, at home with a new baby, or confined to a hospice bed. One Friend from Germany felt such a connection with us online that she was moved to apply for membership. Having had these Friends in our midst this year, we are unwilling to lose them when we move our worship back into the meetinghouse in 2021. Thus, we have made a commitment to have hybrid worship once it is possible to gather in

person again. Discerning how to make that hybrid experience seamless and inclusive without placing unsustainable burdens on the community will be a primary challenge for 2021.

In terms of our vocal ministry, while we continue to yearn for deeper grounding for some messages, our experience of online communal worship is in some ways richer than before as we have been blessed by vocal ministry from Friends who have joined us online. Our Worship & Ministry Committee has sought to deepen our collective understanding of Spirit-led vocal ministry by sponsoring Adult Classes and engaging with individual ministers.

When the lockdown restrictions eased, several Friends followed a leading to hold a socially distanced meeting for worship outdoors at the meetinghouse when weather permits. Tuesday morning worship continues on Zoom, with half an hour of worship and half an hour of reading from *Faith & Practice*, as does our bimonthly Bible Study group.

### **Support of Our Community**

Some of our deepest concerns during this challenging time have been to maintain a sense of connection among us and to care for those who have been isolated. As well as handling membership issues, our Care & Counsel Committee offered other support to many members and attenders, including offering outdoor childcare so that young parents can attend outdoor worship. In partnership with Care & Counsel, Hospitality Committee members brought meals to those with medical issues and new parents. We hope this brought love and attention and sustenance to those of our community who are in need. At a time when so many are struggling, this has been an enormous undertaking. We lost several beloved members of our community this year and gathered online to honor the lives of members we loved even when the ugliness of a racist Zoom bombing tried to get in the way. Our Care & Counsel and Worship & Ministry Committees jointly formed an Ad Hoc Committee on End-of-Life Issues to formalize committee responsibilities after a death so that this ministry is shared more equitably across committees and no essential tasks are missed.

Although we closed the meetinghouse in March, we made the decision to honor our commitment to our paid employees and continue to do so. With nearly all rental income and Skyspace contributions lost, our Finance Committee guided us through difficult budgetary decisions, including whether to apply for paycheck protection (we did not), accept a government loan, or delay our mortgage payments (both of which we did). Despite the financial challenges posed by the pandemic, appeals from our Stewardship Committee prompted great generosity from community members to ensure we met our budgetary goals. These and other financial decisions have highlighted our need for a more grounded process for discernment around financial questions that are beyond the purview of any single committee. An Ad Hoc Committee on Financial Discernment was formed to bring needed clarity and grounding to our financial decision making.

Our Nominating Committee seeks to help match Friends' gifts and the movement of Spirit in their own spiritual journeys to the movement of the Spirit in the life and work of the Meeting. With a new standing committee (Addressing Racism) and the proliferation of Ad Hoc Committees (Refugee Support, End-of-Life Issues, COVID Response, and Financial Discernment), we have a lot of openings to fill in a community whose members already feel stretched thin. We find that a small group of very active people wear many different hats, which means that (as we have learned to our sorrow) the loss of one of these essential people can

have a devastating effect on the operations of the Meeting in addition to its emotional impact. Nominating Committee works hard to fill open committee slots, and this year met the additional challenge of identifying a new Clerk, Treasurer, and Recording Clerk.

Caring for one another, building community, welcoming visitors, and creating a peaceful place in which people can be with others, are some of the ways that Spirit moves in the work of our committees. We have sorely missed aspects of our community life that have been difficult to recreate online, including the wonderful food and conviviality provided by our Hospitality Committee and the warm welcome of guests by our Outreach Committee. Our Skyspace Committee has missed providing the world with a meditative 50-minute slow-art experience where many of our guests find an element of the Divine as they contemplate the heavens through our open roof. Our monthly hymn sing has also proved impossible to undertake safely. When these activities are possible again, we will cherish them all the more for this time of absence.

### **Education and Enrichment**

Our bimonthly Adult Class offerings this year have helped to keep us connected to our Quaker practice, to our various leadings in the wider world, to the arts, and to big questions of life and death. With a robust schedule of diverse programming, attendance at Adult Class has grown over the past few years, with typically 25 to 30 people joining. The Zoom format has made it possible to have presenters and guests join us from afar, broadening the scope of our programming. Adult Classes have allowed various committees to lift up their concerns, to educate, and to provide a forum for conversations about difficult topics such as racism and reparations.

The Religious Education Committee has been faithful in creating online programming for our children since the start of the pandemic, though we are saddened that attendance has been low. The online experience is just not the same as in person, especially for young people who are already fatigued by online schooling. It has been difficult for young families to stay connected with the Meeting during this time, and we have looked for creative solutions to reach them. Our Zoom Christmas pageant was well-attended, and on December 21st we all enjoyed Winter Solstice Bedtime Stories from around the world. We know that many families are struggling, and we miss having them with us.

### **Our Witness in the World**

Our witness in the wider world also looked different this year. We were unable to host homeless families through the Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network this summer as we usually do, and instead our PIHN Committee collected food, personal care items, furniture, and Christmas presents for PIHN families.

Our Refugee Support Working Group has continued to raise funds for Syrian refugees, led by Spirit in compassion and empathy for those around the world who are struggling with basic needs. Thanksgiving pie-baking was both a logistical challenge and also a great success in terms of fundraising and community building in the midst of a difficult holiday.

Our Peace & Social Concerns Committee focused on educating the Meeting about the faith-based community organization POWER, an effort which culminated in our joining POWER this year. A goal for 2021 will be to involve the wider meeting community in POWER in a deeper

and more consistent way. As usual, the committee accepted grant applications from community members and distributed \$5,000 to local service organizations.

We continue to grapple with racial justice issues, both within the Society of Friends and in the wider society. After the brutal murder of George Floyd, we organized a socially distanced silent vigil for racial justice at the meetinghouse. This year we became clear that our Ad Hoc Antiracism Working Group needed to become a standing committee, now called the Addressing Racism Committee. At a called meeting for worship with attention to business in July, that committee presented the results of their 2019 survey to assess the racial climate of the meeting. More than 60 responses were collected, and the analysis and presentation of those results were monumental tasks. To quote that report:

“With approximately 87.5% of the meeting community identifying as white, white perspectives, sensibilities and biases pervade the culture of Chestnut Hill Monthly Meeting. The voices of People of Color (POC) and their perspectives are so underrepresented as not to be representational at all. In a spiritual community that prides itself on searching for ‘Truth,’ this is a serious deficit.”

Overall, the survey results demonstrated that the meeting community sees spiritual value in addressing racism and has a good understanding of some issues, yet many of us have very little racial diversity in our lives. This analysis gives us a clearer picture of where to focus our energies going forward. Thirty Friends came to hear the report and join in the worship sharing that followed. We continue to look to each other for support and accountability in this work, for example through a book group organized by our Library Committee to read *Me and White Supremacy*.

In a time when many local polling places were closed for safety concerns, we opened our meetinghouse to three different divisions on election day, welcoming hundreds of voters. We were thankful to have this opportunity to support the democratic process.

In all of the challenges this year has brought—the pandemic, the racial justice crisis, the climate crisis, and political polarization—we sense that Spirit is asking us to become braver, more grounded, and more faithful. It is easy to be discouraged by overwhelming crises, but it has been heartening to see how, when some among us keep the faith, it invigorates all of us to continue on. As we grapple with the spiritual challenges of our time, we expect to see changes within ourselves and within the Meeting.

## **Conclusion**

In the midst of an incredibly stressful and unprecedented year, we have held onto each other well. The pandemic could easily have been a period of hibernation or a slow falling away, but relationships have continued to grow. We are asking deep questions together, and we are taking on new and challenging work. We have found ways to stay open to the promptings of the Guide within our Meeting and out in the world.

At the same time, we know that this has not been true for everyone. Our online meetings for worship have shrunk in size over time, and younger people are not as present. Online worship does not work for everyone, and some Friends feel isolated. We have had to lay down so many things that we did before COVID. We don’t know when it will be safe to physically gather again, and we don’t know how much we will have changed when we finally do gather.

Love required us to stay physically distant this year. Love required us to be stronger than perhaps we would have preferred; to plant ourselves deeply in faith to withstand the gales of turbulent times; to reach out to each other and lean on each other and support each other; to be a true community. Much is still uncertain, but we take heart from the ongoing work of our Property and Landscape Committees, who maintain our meetinghouse and its grounds, keeping things clean and orderly, cutting the grass, tending the plants: holding the faith that someday we will at last embrace each other again.