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Bethesda Friends Meeting

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2020

Draft Presented to

Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business, March 7, 2021

The Spiritual State of the Meeting Report (SSOM) is a reflection on the previous year of the Meeting’s life. In 2020, the Meeting’s life was shaped by constraints created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Early in the year, the Meeting successfully transitioned from in-person interactions to conducting its worship, business, programs and fellowship almost entirely via videoconference.

To aid the Meeting in assessing the spiritual state of the Meeting, the Ministry and Worship Committee adopted three queries developed by the Yearly Meeting.  We requested views on the queries from each committee. We also solicited feedback from individual friends via email, an on-line survey available from the Bethesda Friends Meeting (BFM) website and our Facebook page. And we engaged in group discussion of the issues, via videoconference, during worship-sharing at Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business on January 3, and in a post-worship session on January 31.

***How does Spirit prosper in our Meeting? How have we protected the Spirit this year?***

Many of us felt that Spirit was nurtured throughout our community in our worship, in our pastoral outreach, and in our communal activities.

Throughout the year, our Meetings for Worship felt robust, in spite of the shift away from in-person gatherings. We typically had 45-50 participating by Zoom. Certainly, there are Friends who regularly came to in-person Sunday Meeting for Worship who do not join worship via Zoom. But there were also benefits to the Zoom format. One benefit was the ability to see the faces of all of the other worshippers who used their cameras. At in-person worship, one can rarely see the faces of more than half of those present, or who offer messages. Very significantly, many members and attenders who no longer live in our area were able to participate in Zoom worship from afar. We have participants from, for example, the Eastern shore of Maryland, Delaware, New York, North Carolina, California, Florida, Nevada, Oregon, Great Britain and France. Those who joined us from 100s or 1000s of miles away have frequently shared with us how enriching it is to them to be able to worship with us. Our shared life in the Spirit was significantly enhanced by the presence of dear Friends from around the nation and the world.

By the fall, we felt comfortable also offering in-person worship outdoors, protected by tents erected in the courtyard at the Sidwell Friends Lower School campus. As the season progressed, a stalwart group continued to worship under the tent, connected by Zoom with the rest of the worshipping community, until the campus was closed in December for the winter holiday. The participants, all wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, greatly appreciated the opportunity to worship together in person.

After worship, in lieu of a coffee hour, we offered a collective opportunity to share with the subset of Friends who “linger” on Zoom. Many Friends have felt that these group conversations have led to much deeper understanding of and appreciation for one another than the typical coffee hour.

The Meeting has many other activities that nurture the Spirit and were continued virtually. Our Spiritual Formation Group grew out of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting retreat in September 2020 which four members attended and has grown to 14 participants. Our weekly Bible Study group is vital and deeply enriches those who participate. Meeting Friends continued to meet virtually to deepen their spiritual experience using the tools of Experiment with Light. There is deep loyalty and interest in our Book Group, which reads and discusses a different book monthly. We continued, via Zoom, our quarterly Spiritual Coffee House meetings at which Friends perform, sing, and share poetry and visual art, all in circumstances that illuminate the Spirit working in our lives. A large number of Friends provide continuing support to “our” family of refugees from Afghanistan. These relationships across language, culture and religion are driven by the Universal Spirit of love we all share.

We have been delighted by the response of our children to the pandemic that stopped First Day School classes. Most of our children do not participate in our Zoom Meetings for Worship – Sunday being a day to minimize the screen time that dominates their school day and to recover from being “zoomed out.” Yet, among our youth, connection and service are embraced. Early in the pandemic as the economy crashed and demand for nutrition support exploded, Meeting youth organized a food drive to collect food and money to support the Manna Food Center. The children and families made important contacts with the Meeting community in the course of the collection. As Christmas approached, the Meeting youth organized a toy collection to support the toy distribution coordinated by A Wider Circle. The youth arranged and organized notification of the needs, the collection of toys from donors’ homes, and the delivery of letters of thanks.

We were able to continue the work of our committees. For many, meeting with committees by Zoom encouraged participation, because no travel was needed.

In the words of one Friend, “this continuing activity was our triumph over Corona.” Friends have frequently discussed how to maintain the advantages of Zoom once vaccination and transmission numbers enable the resumption of in-person Worship and meetings.

***What are Friends doing to support one another? How have we addressed the conflicts that have arisen this year?***

Our Pastoral Care Committee has worked very hard to stay in touch with all Friends as we face the pandemic, as well as the usual range of challenges and concerns from other, sometimes dire, medical and personal issues. For example, in addition to pastoral calls, the committee has provided extensive support to a couple facing a grave medical condition. A marriage enrichment group continues to support committed couples.

The pandemic, of course, changed the character of education and work, and upended important and well-established practices. The social life of Friends was also upended. Important patterns of self-care such as exercise were profoundly disrupted. Physical contact – handshakes and hugs – and other expressions of comfort, friendship and trust had to be curtailed, not only within the Meeting community, but with family members and other friends and loved ones. The public health rules of “social distancing” required masking and separation – outdoors as well as indoors. Many Friends felt some degree of emotional distress from the omnipresent anxiety about risk of contagion that surrounded every venture out of one’s apartment or home. In the face of these challenges, Bethesda Friends supported one another – as individuals, couples, families, and in our committees.

Bethesda Friends have been aware of the many conflicts in our wider society – conflicts that various parties seek to use to further inflame and divide us. The messages offered in our worship generally do not focus directly on the conflicts in the public and political realms. But the murder of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others galvanized many in the Meeting – as it galvanized the nation – to focus on taking action for racial justice.

***What does spirituality mean to us and our Meeting? How does our Meeting reflect that? Has it been different or the same during 2020 with the coronavirus pandemic and discussions of racial equality, climate change, and the presidential election?***

In our worship and in our work together we endeavor to ground ourselves in the Spirit.  And to the extent that we are able to do this, we find ourselves feeling connected with all our fellow beings.  We remain sensitive to the promptings of the Inner Guide, leading us to seek the good, and aspire to goodness.  The divisive and challenging times in which we live create difficulties for many of us – can we stand up to those who would preach intolerance, sow discord, and act unjustly, even as we affirm that there is the spark of the Divine in each being?  Can we “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God?” (Micah 6:8).

To a remarkable degree, our Meetings for Worship have been free of discord and lamentation and have been a source of rich encouragement for so many of us who engage in the work of justice, education and enlightenment, and healing. The period at the end of our worship that welcomes the expression of “Joys & Sorrows” has become, in this year, filled with even more messages seeking the Spiritual power of the Meeting to be shared widely and generously. This time has become an even more important occasion for spiritual sharing among members and attendees during the difficult year of 2020.

We were reminded by the query to ask whether the work of the Meeting – in our Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business, in our committee meetings, and in our other business-related gatherings – is conducted in a manner that allows space for reflection upon, and consideration of, the Spirit and how the Spirit may shape the Meeting’s decisions and actions.  This is an ongoing challenge.  One Friend suggested two concrete responses: giving added attention to this concern in determining how time is spent in Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business and offering training to committee clerks on the art of clerking in the manner of Friends.

We are conscious that many of us have benefitted from lives rich with opportunity and privilege. It is our longtime practice, at the conclusion of our worship, to encourage our members to financially contribute to communities and organizations that engage in the work that advances our values. Notably, in a year in which we had to cancel Spring Fling, a yearly fundraiser which generates funds to support for Ramallah Friends School, Friends stepped up and generously provided strong support even with no event. Each week we remind ourselves of the urgent work of healing, reconciliation and service that is needed in our neighborhoods, nation and world, and our role in financially supporting that work.

Most Bethesda Friends begin 2021 with relief and renewed optimism. However, for many of us, the January 6 violence at the Capitol was terribly immediate. Some of our members and attenders work for the Congress (or did so). The attack was deeply shocking to us, compelling us to more deeply appreciate the breadth, depth and volatility of racism, anti-Semitism, and other hatreds in our communities.

Perhaps most significantly, the Meeting has tried to embrace the challenge of addressing the pervasiveness of racism in our culture, economy, politics, and attitudes. In our Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business and other gatherings, Bethesda Meeting has embraced the Yearly Meeting call to re-envision our role and identity as an anti-racist community. As 2020 concluded, all the Meeting’s committees were developing plans for further incorporating anti-racism as a feature of our work.

Through these challenges, we regularly draw strength from one another – from the inspiring service of other Friends, and their gifts of their spiritual strength. Every week we are encouraged as we are joined in worship by Friends from around the nation and the world. We are looking forward to resuming the option of in-person, social distanced worship under a tent outside our Meetinghouse, and further in-person worship in later months.

We are deeply grateful for our Clerks who mobilized a joyful and caring response to the pandemic, a response that has sustained our communal life in the Spirit. We are grateful for one another, for the countless acts of loving support that have made this year much more than merely bearable but renewed our faith in our power as a loving community.

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