

State of Society, 2020

Durham Friends Meeting, Durham, Maine

New England Yearly Meeting

It was the year of staying home; the year of staying apart from one another. It was the year without hugs or refreshments. It was the year we worshipped in digital boxes. Zoom was the name of our manner of worship, but we all stayed put.

It was a year of global disease -- a new virus that took the lives of millions of people. Members of Durham Friends Meeting were spared from this epidemic and only a few of our friends and relatives were directly affected. Nevertheless, it changed our lives and filled our minds and hearts with news of the devastation it brought.

Worship. In March 2020, the rapid spread of the coronavirus pandemic pressed us to suspend worship in the meetinghouse and to enter a new realm of virtual worship. Without any way of knowing how long this would last, we truly needed to be led as way opened. The abrupt slowdown in daily life brought new awareness of the beauty of creation in the unfolding of spring. It also brought difficulty and uncertainty to our families, friends, and neighbors and a new meaning to the pastoral care that we give to one another.

Our worship rituals were tested and stretched. We adjusted to seeing one another face on, in little boxes, or, in some cases, to only being able to hear another's voice. We learned to mute and unmute and to use the chat function. While the skills of more technologically attuned Friends and examples from other Meetings eased this unwelcome transition, glitches in technology made for moments of frustration and occasional humor. Eventually worship in song reappeared even if we could only sing together without hearing one another.

A contemplative prayer group meeting on Monday mornings has meant that more of us throughout New England could gather in prayer and fellowship.

Our new form of worship brought opportunities for physically distant Friends to join us, increasing our numbers gathered at Meeting. Others we count on seeing have found electronic worship to be difficult or unsatisfying and we have missed them. We continued to care for our members when we learned of difficulties in their lives, but, separated from one another, we worried whether we were learning about all the circumstances that should have drawn our attention.

Christian Education. In this COVID year, we saw much less of our children. Still, the deep and abiding concern for providing spiritual guidance for the Meeting children

continued to be a strong point in the Meeting. The resilient leadership and skilled guidance of Wendy Schlotterbeck kept momentum with our youth by creating opportunities for gathering in safe ways. We experimented with online connections, holding weekly story time and a Virtual Game Night, but later settled on in-person, masked gatherings outside – hikes and games and celebrations -- to maintain personal connections. We look forward to the time when we can meet together safely, without restrictions.

Peace and Social Concerns. Our Peace and Social Concerns Committee sustained a consistent educational effort to bring greater awareness to concerns about racial injustice, mistreatment of indigenous peoples and what we might do to challenge these social ills. We are grateful for initiatives and materials from Friends Committee for National Legislation and from New England Yearly Meeting.

Money and Property. In financial terms, we came through the year in good condition. Our Trustees made a number of important improvements and repairs to the meetinghouse. They also established a new plot in Lunt Cemetery for green burials with 30 individual plots designated for such use.

Outreach. Still feeling our way in being a programmed Meeting without a paid pastor, in August, we added a paid Meeting Care Coordinator to help strengthen the meeting's outreach and in-reach. Mey Hasbrook has brought energy and initiative to this work. Her arrival accelerated our work identifying message givers for worship. She brought new program ideas and strengthened our pastoral care activities.

Losses and Gains. Clarabel Marstallar passed away just before the year began. Midway through the year we lost Sukie Rice. A generation apart in age, these two had been stalwarts of the Meeting for decades. We also grieved the losses of longtime members and attenders Phyllis Wetherell, Edie Whitehead, Mildred Alexander and Jane Walters.

Several newcomers found their way to join us in worship together. We are grateful for their fresh energies.

Still in COVID closure, Durham Friends Meeting is steadfast and hopeful. We are discovering new ways we can be a community of worship, care and witness.

We end with a poem from one of our members that speaks to our condition.

I Have Longed to Be Back in the Meeting Room

By Katherine Hildebrandt

I long to be back in the Meeting room with each of you. I do.
The quality of that space helps me center down, experience God's spirit.
When I am in that room, I sense, as a Friend said recently, the spirit of those who are no longer with us.
I feel the spiritual presence of others who have sat in waiting worship before me.
When I go out each week to get the mail, I always take a few minutes to go into the Meeting room, and it settles me to do that.

In the meantime, we gather in this way.
Each of us in our own space, mostly alone.
But I do not feel alone.
I sense our connectedness, our mutuality.
I experience God's presence, deeply and profoundly.

It's curious, isn't it?
That we, as Quakers, don't call our place of worship a "Church".
We don't adorn our Meetinghouse; we don't generally center our worship around rituals.
The "Church", for Quakers, is the gathered people.

After the Meetinghouse burned in 1986, I remember Ralph Green, our minister at the time, say,
"We could meet in a barn!"
Ralph always looked on the bright side.
But it's true for us, we can worship without the building, and we are.

I have sensed that, since March, our worship has settled into a deep place. I have felt nourished and held.
Our worship seems uncluttered, focused.
On God's abiding love for us.
And our love and patience for each other.
Sometimes I stop and look at each one of you on the screen, and I send a silent prayer to each one.
Sometimes, I feel Prayed Through.

My hope for our Meeting is that when we can gather again at our beloved Meetinghouse,
That we can strive to maintain this simple, clear, direct connection to the spirit.
Leaving our outward differences at the door,
We can gather, find nourishment, to commune in that deep, eternal place.
In that place where we are one in the spirit.

Approved by Durham Friends Meeting, April 18, 2021