

Asheville Friends Meeting
2024 State of the Meeting Report

Approved 3-9-25

How have our practices in meeting for worship and business helped move us toward or away from unity as a spiritual community? How have we as a spiritual community encouraged each other to answer the urgings of the Spirit? What kept us from encouraging each other? How have we as a meeting and as individuals used our worldly activities as acts of witness to answer that of Spirit in others?

At least two dozen Friends have regularly attended our meetings for worship each week and about twenty attended our meetings with attention to business each month. Each week we are blessed with visitors, and a few have become regular attenders. We were overjoyed that some new attenders jumped right in to participate in the work of the Meeting, bringing their energy and perspectives to all our activities. One Friend transferred their membership to our Meeting, and one of our young families was blessed with the birth of a child. We take time to share our joys and concerns at the end of the first hour meetings for worship. This practice brings us closer together, offering opportunities for more intimate and personal interactions. The positive effects of coming to meeting for worship and of participating in committee work rippled outward into the wider community.

Our First Day School program involved more than a half dozen adults and often a dozen or more children ranging in age from toddler to teen. The children conducted junior business meetings regularly, and adults joyfully united with them to support their community service work. Other activities that brought our different generations together for fun and community building were our Secret Pals gift exchange in the Winter, our annual Youth Celebration and cookout in June, and our holiday programs at the end of the year: on three successive Sundays we enjoyed simple gift making, a Nativity play, and a holiday potluck and carol sing with some talented Friends playing musical instruments. Our children and young people encouraged each other to share their thoughts, their gifts and acts of service

in their schools and in the community. They – and we – held each other, as well as the local, national, and global community, in the Light.

Committees concerned with the upkeep of the Meetinghouse met regularly and guided us in many necessary tasks. The House and Grounds Committee organized two work days to attend to our neglected yard and gardens, and the Library Committee restored good order to the library, finding better homes for the various items that had accumulated there during the pandemic. One of our meeting community members opened a business as a handyman. We have benefited from his diligence and competence after hiring him to work on projects that had been pending for some time.

Our spiritual enrichment programs have been rich and varied, encouraging us to seek and follow the leadings of Spirit. Reflection on vocal ministry helped us to answer Spirit's urging. We opened our hearts in worship-sharing on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. We learned more about Climate Change and steps we can take personally and as a community to mitigate or forestall the looming catastrophe. Our post card writing on each fifth Sunday throughout the year gave us the opportunity to communicate with our elected officials on matters of concern to us as Quakers. Among other things, we lobbied our members of Congress for a cease-fire and humanitarian aid in Gaza, and thanked our County Sheriff for rejecting the demand that his deputies act as agents of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

We engaged in a project of Truth and Reconciliation with Asheville's Black Community, facilitated by Dr. Melchor Hall, executive director of the Solidarity Arts & Education Decolonial Initiatives Collective. We met weekly among ourselves and monthly with Dr. Hall throughout the year, our efforts culminating in a draft Statement of Apology to Asheville's Black Community and commitments to engage in repair of historical and present-day harms. Some of our members attended meetings of the Community Reparations Commission and reported back. One Friend attended the Health & Wellness Impact Focus group that met every two weeks during the time that the Reparations Commission met.

There has been a spirit of community in our business meetings both in handling our day-to-day operations and in considering the many deep and difficult topics that have come to the fore. Friends felt the presence of Spirit as we opened to each other's leadings and listened intently to what each of us was called to share in words and actions, carefully considering what was offered so that we better understood each other, our meeting, our local community, and the world. In our meetings for business in 2024, Friends united in creating an Indigenous People's Fund, seeded with a percentage of our property value and a portion of the money we collect from other groups who rent our building. The Meeting agreed to purchase renewable energy credits each month to compensate for our fossil-fuel-derived electricity consumption, and to invest in clean energy and clean water in underdeveloped regions through a carbon offsetting fund.

We have been looking for a presiding clerk since the term of service for the previous clerk ended in September. In the meantime, former clerks have been taking on this responsibility a month at a time.

As individuals, we did myriad varieties of work in the world, sustained by the nurturing we received amongst ourselves. By reporting on community and non-meeting programs and events, or announcing them in advance, we inspired one another to be more involved. We participated in educational programs that made us aware or gave us insight into others' situations. Friends helped feed those who were hungry, and worked with children in schools or in our meeting as they tried to make sense of interruptions and difficulties that their families faced. Some of us worked to protect our electoral process. Volunteers drove people to voting sites. One of our families spent six months in Ghana. The parents taught in the local university and the children went to school in the community.

Friends supported members who had a felt call to a particular project. One Friend, a professional blacksmith, brought us to participate in a national "gun surrender" project, transforming surrendered guns into garden tools. Some Friends worked with the Zig Zag Zoom initiative of one of our attenders, which supports Black festivals and entrepreneurs in the Asheville area. They helped set up tents, carried

materials for vendors, and served water and coffee to vendors and seniors. Other Friends participated in establishing an Alliance for Beyond Land Acknowledgement, to promote right relations with peoples of Turtle Island, especially Eastern Band Cherokee Indians.

Several of us attended the SAYMA Retreat and Sessions in Berea, Kentucky. A member of our community offered a Forest Bathing workshop at SAYMA gathering, providing SAYMA Friends the opportunity to share their experience of communing with God/Divine/Spirit in nature.

We held a memorial in June for Bob Smith, longtime and cherished member of our meeting. We hosted over 100 people from the Asheville community and around the country to celebrate the life of this beloved Friend. We sought and hired a Black professional videographer to record the event. Even before Bob's death, we had been providing a weekly meal for him and his wife, Donna. We continued this practice after his passing, offering companionship for Donna as well as help around the house and in the garden when needed.

As Asheville faith communities joined with Veterans for Peace in observing the International Day of Peace on September 21, Friends shared among ourselves and with them our anger and grief regarding the starvation and slaughter in Gaza and in other wars across the world.

On September 27th, six days after the International Day of Peace, Hurricane Helene struck communities in western North Carolina. Many of us had never before experienced a major natural disaster. Residents of our area died. Homes, businesses, and the Swannanoa Valley Friends meetinghouse were all destroyed. Most of us were left without power, water, and other utilities, some for weeks. Many in the broader community were without shelter and adequate food. We tried, as a meeting and as individuals, to restore our lives and the meeting process for worship and business.

In our grief and fear we attempted to cultivate a culture of peace, a safe space in our meeting despite enormous anxieties, discouragements, and exhaustion. During

the time after the hurricane, we reached out to neighbors and community members to share resources and support. We took food, water, and phone-charging batteries to shut-ins. We found that the community work was spiritual work, that new relationships could be formed through our interactions. Our young Friends held a bake sale to raise money for the Asheville-Buncombe Community Christian Ministry's (ABCCM) Transformation Village, and the Beloved Community. They wrote letters of encouragement to them and thank you notes to Red Cross Disaster Relief, World Central Kitchen, and Mercy Chefs who helped our community so much during the devastation after the storm.

We encouraged and received funds from far and wide after Helene ravished our area. We facilitated disbursement of these funds as requested by concerned Quakers and others nationwide and from Canada and Great Britain. With the meeting's approval, we disbursed those contributions to those in greatest need, especially our sister meetings in Swannanoa and Celo. Friends opened their homes after the hurricane for people to do laundry and have showers. A group from Athens Meeting in Ohio that came to help with the Helene devastation stayed in a home provided by one of our members. It made us feel useful to be able to help others. Sharing helped us all to heal as a community. When we acted with integrity, all of the efforts deepened our spiritual lives. We developed into a more loving, supportive community, even though we were sometimes so busy with mundane tasks that we neglected to encourage each other, and sometimes we had great ideas, but didn't follow through on them.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene and the run-up to the elections, fear and anxieties ran high. We received inspiration from one another responding to the callings that resonated most deeply for each of us and felt authentic. Some of us did not ask for help, sensing how exhausted many in our meeting and our community were and still are. Some of us felt regret and guilt for not doing more. Our families supported each other through challenges, struggles, and concerns as well as celebrations.

We have been helping each other process the outcome of an election in which a convicted criminal and sexual predator received enough votes to lead the nation. We heard and loved each other as we processed current events and sought a just world in which to live. In North Carolina we were warned by reputable watchdog groups such as the Carter Center that there might be tampering with our elections. We helped each other find balance in our lives as we searched for answers, scared and worried about the state of our country. We have seen increased attendance since the election.

It was a challenging year all in all, reminding us that the well-being of each of us is linked to the well-being of everyone. We listened and encouraged each other to respond to the needs of our Meeting and our community as we were led and had the capacity to do so. We tried to serve those in the community at large with integrity and love. We expanded our connections to other like-minded communities by offering our meetinghouse for a modest fee to a Zen Buddhist meditation group and to the Ethical Humanist Society of Asheville. Their activities reflect our Quaker belief in the Light in all beings. One of the Zen practitioners offered to paint our meeting room for us, if we provided the paint. It was such a thoughtful offer and the newly painted meeting room looks awesome. We are grateful for our Buddhist friends and the Ethical Society. A Black Lives Matter banner stretches across our porch along with peace prayer flags made by our young Friends. All of these things remind us of the Quaker testimonies that provide guidance in our daily lives.