

Columbia Friends State of the Meeting Report for the Southern Appalachia Yearly Meeting & Association (SAYMA), 2025

Submitted by Lori Donath, Clerk, Columbia Friends Meeting

Columbia Friends Meeting continues to persevere through major disagreements both practical and ideological, bringing into 2025 an increased capacity for mending and growth...at just the time when we need resilience most. We still enjoy being a small meeting whose people for the most part rotate in attendance rather than come on the same days, but we have been seeing new faces and also some old friends. We celebrated one new member early in the year and have two friends requesting clearness committees for membership. Members and attendees have found some comfort in the Meeting as they react to the actions of the new federal administration, some of which have had effects close to home. As well, friends' participation and validation in rallies (protesting the actions of the administration) have served as acts of witness to answer that of Spirit in others.

Friends at CFM feel that, although there is room for clarifying Quaker process as regards decision-making, we're doing fairly well in terms of our practices. If not in unity, we have a unified spirit. One friend commented that hearing others with a longer history talk about what SAYMA meant to them made them feel closer to SAYMA *and* to people in our meeting—to understand our members—to nurture SAYMA and receive nurturing from SAYMA.

Friends expressed gratitude that our spiritual community recognizes the many different urgings among us. Overall, in terms of encouraging each other to answer the urgings of Spirit, friends have been navigating a perceived tension between the Quaker values of caring about one another and speaking one's truth—a tension parallel the different stances within the Meeting toward Israel and occupied Palestine, as well as meeting house maintenance matters. Whereas one friend described being in a strange and uncomfortable place when not in synchrony with other friends' leadings—not presuming to be right, but not in synchrony with others (“to be able to stand aside is a gift that Quakers give us”)--other friends described such a lack of synchronization as an obstacle to unity in the Meeting, an obstacle to one's own leading. Addressing these and other concerns, another friend invoked the Quaker practice of *plainspeaking* by emphasizing that one must focus on one's own “sense of spirit, rather than on another person's feelings and struggle.” The Meeting will receive ministry from Atlanta Friends Mary Ann and Bill Downey in the form of a summer weekend workshop on other such practices. The workshop promises to bring the meeting closer together by providing an opportunity to spend time together, practice Quaker process, and understand more deeply.

On March 30th, as part of intergenerational worship on the fifth First Day, the Meeting held a long-planned dedication of the Meeting's pollinator garden and nature trail renovation. The garden and trail renovation resulted from several partnerships, a grant from the Richland County Conservation Commission, and labor and cooperation among the Meeting. In response to SAYMA's second query, one friend recognized the many such goals the Meeting has achieved despite its size and expressed regret at initially underestimating the power of a small meeting. The garden dedication was a welcome and joyful contrast against the global landscape, an occasion for celebrating what is possible when we see the light in one another.

Summary of Responses to Queries:

How have our practices in meetings for worship and business helped move us toward or away from unity as a spiritual community?

Friends at CFM feel that, although there is room for clarifying Quaker process as regards decision-making, we're doing fairly well in terms of our practices. If not in unity, we have a unified spirit. We have persevered and worked our way through disagreements by making an effort to adhere to Quaker process in nominations and in worship with attention to business. Also, a friend commented that hearing others with a longer history talk about what SAYMA meant to them made them feel closer to SAYMA *and* to people in our meeting—to understand our members—to nurture SAYMA and receive nurturing from SAYMA.

How have we as a spiritual community encouraged each other to answer the urgings of Spirit? What kept us from encouraging each other?

Overall, in terms of encouraging each other to answer the urgings of Spirit, friends have been navigating a perceived tension between the Quaker values of caring about one another and speaking one's truth—a tension parallel the different stances within the Meeting toward Israel and occupied Palestine, as well as practical maintenance matters at home. Friends expressed gratitude that our little spiritual community recognizes the many different urgings among us, such that our urgings do not exert pressure on others but make us clear about what we are called to do. One friend described her leading toward collective advocacy for social change as necessarily calling in others to join her: "We must but be very clear about what we are called to do, what our tradition encourages us to do." Another friend described feeling they are in a strange and uncomfortable place when they are not in synchrony with other friends' leadings—not presuming to be right, but not in synchrony; they affirmed that "to be able to stand aside is a gift that Quakers give us." One friend described such a lack of synchronization as an obstacle to unity in the Meeting—and even to one's own leading: "When someone has a strong feeling about an issue, I think it affects the rest of the group; we temper our response out of concern that we will disturb a member of our Meeting." Another friend echoed a sense of often "holding back" out of concerns about negatively affecting the Meeting as a whole. Addressing these and other concerns, that same friend invoked the Quaker practice of *plainspeaking* by emphasizing that one must focus on one's own "sense of spirit, rather than on another person's feelings and struggle." The Meeting will receive ministry from Atlanta Friends Mary Ann and Bill Downey in the form of a summer weekend workshop; the workshop promises to bring the meeting closer together by providing an opportunity to spend time together, practice Quaker process, and understand more deeply.

April 30th the Meeting held a long-planned intergenerational dedication of the Meeting's pollinator garden and nature trail renovation, which resulted from several partnerships, a grant from the Richland County Conservation Commission, and labor and cooperation among the Meeting. In response to the second query, one friend recognized the many such goals the Meeting has achieved despite its size and expressed regret about initially underestimating the power of a small meeting. The garden dedication was a welcome and joyful contrast against the global landscape, an occasion for celebrating what is possible when we see the light in one another.

• How have we as a meeting and as individuals used our worldly activities as acts of witness to answer that of Spirit in others?

One friend described how the concepts in SPICES helped her stay connected to Quaker practice.

Others shared their participation and validation in rallies protesting the actions of the new federal administration. A group of friends at the rallies holds a banner that reads *Love thy neighbor, no exceptions*. “I can’t tell you how many people approach us and thank us and acknowledge that ‘oh it’s right that the friends should be here.’ It’s a source of strength to me and hope it is for others.”

Friends spoke of other acts of witness, from a pilgrimage to India to volunteering with the SC Advocacy Team of the Friends Committee on National Legislation. “When the Advocacy Team talks online with Sen Graham’s staff person virtually they are witnessing to the spirit of that person with what’s happening in Washington.” One friend remarked on how the Meeting had been increasingly bearing witness through attentiveness to one another routine interactions, being present with the light of another person, resting into ease, grace, sharing light.