

## **CINCINNATI FRIENDS MEETING 2020 STATE OF SOCIETY**

*A community of growing compassion in action*

As individuals, as a congregation, as a country and as a global community, 2020 was a year of being:

*triggered, yet touched;  
divided, yet gathered;  
uncertain, yet hopeful;  
angry, yet peaceful; and  
absorbed, yet prayerful.*

It was a time of great paradox, one that we at Cincinnati Friends Meeting gleaned the lessons and wisdom from leaning on our testimonies, our direct relationship with Spirit and one another.

Stripped in lockdown, we were forced into living simply. With a world, and especially a country, in tumult we sought peace. With integrity, we carried on in new ways of outreach and connecting. We forged community in unlikely places, cherishing in-person exchanges. We looked for the inequities and mediated them when and as we could. We collectively witnessed the planet flourish under lockdown and nurtured our weary souls on Meetinghouse grounds, recognizing the fruits of stewardship.

### **PRESENCE OF COMPASSION**

As we hurt, we were opened to deeper compassion for God's blessings, our faith community, each other, Mother Nature, those falling sick with Covid-19 and conspiracy, separated and caged children, the marginalized, the unemployed, the hungry and the isolated.

Our weekly worship, over Facebook then Zoom thanks to the technical talents of our newest member and our administrative assistant, centered and bound us, sometimes as a gathered experience, in an uncertain world.

A tireless Public Health Committee quickly formed to research current medical and governmental advice and prayerfully discern guidelines for outdoor gatherings and small-group indoor meetings. Those members worked with Trustees on cleaning practices and considered when the Meetinghouse, mostly closed during lockdown, might be opened, partially or fully, for corporate worship. We are grateful for their care, compassion and concern for the wellbeing of the entire community.

Our diligent Trustees maintained the building and grounds throughout the pandemic, ensuring our spiritual home was ready when we were. They cleared trees and branches for outside gatherings, replaced signs and updated the septic system for environmental compliance.

Sacred Sunday mornings have been rich, even gathered, as about 50-something join

from around the world. Our minister Jim Newby and facing-bench companion Jeff Arnold, a member of Ministry and Counsel, have guided us through a brief message, silence and vocal ministry from the Meetinghouse for weeks on end.

We appreciated seeing faces, debating whether or not worshippers should be encouraged to make themselves known on camera, but discerned that as an individual choice.

When Sundays felt short, we hosted conversation after the rise of meeting as we would over a meal in the Fireside Room. Gracefully filling a gap, those exchanges grew to a once-a-month discussion on matters of spiritual nurture: how we worship; what practices buoy us; and how we cope during dark times.

### **COMPASSION IN ACTION**

While working out the Zoom kinks and navigating the breadth of Covid-19, we initiated a phone-tree check in and our creative card maker continued to remember birthdays. The conversations were welcome, tender and revealing. Tangible gestures such as mail and a voice on the other end held greater meaning. As we grew to understand our confinement would last, we planned a series of distanced, outdoor Saturday gatherings in late summer that blossomed around a donated fire pit with pumpkin carving and marshmallow roasting.

During warmer months, Walking Meditation and Everyday Mysticism participants met outside, reveling in the woods, sunset and longed-for in-person respites. Permaganic Co., the youth-and-urban-farming ministry the Meeting supports, hosted an outdoor work session.

Fire-pit soirees ended as cold weather and Covid cases mounted, yet individual leadings creatively filled voids. In anticipation of a virtual Christmas-Eve service, members orchestrated a cookie-baking-and-delivery project, reaching those for whom the meeting carried a special concern. Masked bakers dropped off their carefully packaged goodies in the morning, greeted with a festive Fireside Room, later reserved for delivery volunteers. Connecting via a live, distanced visit and home-baked sweets kindled our Christmas Spirit(s).

The Christmas Eve service was, perhaps, more precious because it extended our reach across miles and into homes, keeping an annual tradition with a new twist. Our children and gifted musicians lifted us in song. While our closing candle lighting and rendition of *Silent Night* may have been far from perfect, it had the same ring as if we occupied the Meetinghouse. We were together. Worshipping the birth of Jesus. In a pandemic.

### **GIVING VOICE TO & CONNECTING THE LIGHT OF OTHERS**

We attracted interest beyond worship as our social-media became more vital with a video of the weekly message, invitations to virtual classes, mask sewing, a Friends United

Meeting prayer gathering, American Friends Service Committee workshops and Wilmington College lectures. Facebook posts, some viewed by hundreds, tripled as our blog grew in content, where we responded and doubled subscribers. We traded methods of coping with pandemic anxiety, shared our experiences and spiritual reflections and leaned into historic Quaker response to crises. We successfully hosted the Wilmington Yearly Meeting sessions virtually, drawing 100 participants.

Our Daytime Spirituality group went online for an author chat with Elizabeth Newby, clerk of Peace and Social Concerns, on her updated *A Migrant with Hope: A Memoir of Peril and Promise*. Quaker Max Carter shared from his new book *Palestine and Israel, A Personal Encounter* over two Zoom sessions. They offered new perspectives and a wider understanding of marginalized groups.

Our Peace and Social Concerns committee took a struggling family, members and a member's ailing brother under its financial care while maintaining its assistance to Bethany House, Tender Mercies and the Freestore Food Bank. With Ministry and Counsel, they advised spending unanticipated funds on members' ministries under the care of the meeting, Permaganic Co. and Artsy Fartsy Saturdays, and wider Quaker organizations. Hoping for a new administration, the committee prepared for action against caged children at the border, discriminatory immigration policies and inequality.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Cincinnati Friends Meeting remained in strong financial condition, thanks in part to the generous support of members and regular attenders, in 2020 and was able to exhibit "compassion through action" with financial support totaling \$32,729 to Quaker organizations, local charities that support Quaker ideals, and in support of several local families. These donations, including one to the Ramallah Friends School in Max Carter's name, represented 21 percent of the meeting's income for the year. The scholarship committee also awarded funding to its one applicant, born into the meeting and a senior at Ohio University. We paid our childcare workers even though we were not physically meeting because it was the right thing to do.

Sadly, we said less-public goodbyes to five members and an attender who died in 2020, but warmly remembered their deep faith, love and care of this community. And, in an effort to be more flexible, inclusive and compassionate, we approved a burial-committee recommendation making non-member spouses eligible to share a plot in our Quaker section of Spring Grove Cemetery.

As ministry and counsel brainstormed this report, one member articulated this year of paradox and connecting remotely:

***"The vibrancy of our being together is embedded in the life of the meeting."***

We held ourselves, each other, our community and those hurting to become richer in this action, leaning into Jesus' ideal of "... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Matthew 25:40

