

Cincinnati Friends Meeting 2021 State of Society

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly
Colossians 3:16*



WE WISH TO SHARE what the past year has meant for our community, Cincinnati Friends Meeting. We have been here for one another in order to “*teach and admonish one another with all wisdom*”, as the inspired author of Colossians directs while not neglecting to “*sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*” As a method of answering this directive, and the queries offered with it, we have decided to organize this reflection around a song inspired by the American poet and ecological thinker Wendell Berry. First, we will listen to the queries.

1. What enlightens your life and the life of your meeting?

2. In what ways do you teach and admonish one another in God’s wisdom?

I. Rising/Falling

When I rise, let me rise

Like a bird joyfully

When I fall, let me fall

Like a leaf, gracefully

Without regrets

One way in which we experienced that which enlightens our lives and the life of the community was through the *Sacred Chaos* retreat led by Jim Newby and Mark Minear. During this one-day Saturday retreat our members learned about the importance of our personal spiritual journeys. Jim Newby likes to remind us that our lives as spiritual seekers (and finders) is very much a call to grow spiritually. The joyful and rising aspect of this was in witnessing the close interaction of the share groups that formed after each teaching session and most especially at the final wrap-up when folks were invited to share their experiences with the larger group. One participant remarked that in his long life of church participation he had never been invited to think of his life as a spiritual journey and he was happy to do so now. All in all, the participants generally agreed that it was a very worthwhile retreat. As a result, Ministry and Counsel has it on their to-do list to attempt to do more retreats in the future, going so far as to increase the budget for such for 2022. The fall, or downside, of the retreat was the necessity we had to pare it down to only one day and to avoid the original idea of dining fellowship due to Covid 19 restrictions. Like the leaf that falls gracefully, we

had to patiently endure this diminishing aspect to an otherwise very worthwhile and spiritually nourishing community event.

All events that normally take place in person were affected by the shadow of the pandemic. It is a sign of our resilience that we somehow, call it the work of the Holy Spirit, managed to keep our ties of fellowship strong throughout. Because our community is blessed by talented technical friends, such as Deidre Hazelbaker and Kristin Lally, CFM was able to assist the teleconferencing of the Wilmington Yearly Meeting Summer Gathering . In this we were privileged to join our fellow monthly meetings in the work and the celebrations involved. On the last day of the gathering, CFM opened our meeting house for folks to join in meeting for worship during which time our own Ray Geers was recorded as a minister of the gospel and presented the message.

Since our last State of Society Report, our meeting has received requests for membership from six attenders: Bill Williams, Deidre Hazelbaker, Vicki Culler, Mary and Earl Wittrock and Mardi Fallen. New life and new learning comes to us from these folks as well as from the many new attenders who have been joining us since last year. For this we are truly thankful and blessed. We have tweaked our meeting for worship on Welcoming Day in order to give more attention to the grace and sheer joy of embracing new members.

Other forms of rising are seen in our new initiatives, which includes the following: the formation of a group called *We Care* to attend to members who could use some personal help, the Christmas Cookie delivery friends who, now in their second year of operation, continue to evolve a ministry of surprising tenderness and joy, the new spiritual nurture groups—one on human integration (as per Ken Wilber) and another on Taoism as a personal practice. This is not an exhaustive list certainly, and we will mention other developments further on, but the point to be aware of is that all of these activities speak to the query of enlightening the life of the community.

Not always does everything we dream of or plan turn out according to our fondest expectations. We rise in our sheer ability to dream of the new and expansive, of pulling together and of pulling in somebody new with us along the way. Yes, we at CFM have seen things get messy. Cookies crumble, folks may or may not show up for our events in the way we wish, but here we are, still together—like an old married couple or like newly formed friends wanting to know each other better. SO much grace... but let us continue to the next stanza of our pattern-making song.

II. Working/Playing

When I work, let me work

Like the bee whole-heartedly

When I play, let me play

*Like the breeze-refreshingly,
Light and clear*

What can be more work than a Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business? Well, a meeting for Ministry and Counsel probably comes close. Folks familiar with other meetings in our community, such as the Trustees, the Peace and Social Concerns committee, the folks who attend to our youth or to our fellowships, our finances, etc., may all say the same: Sometimes it is hard work living in community. Sacrifices - you bet! Time taken away from our own families or our other pursuits outside the meeting milieu often goes against the grain - especially against the individualism we have grown up with in our modern culture. Can we take a lesson from our focus scripture, from Colossians 3:16, when it offers the wisdom of living *with gratitude in your hearts to God*? Our Wendell Berry-inspired song presents us with the example of the bee who appears to work whole-heartedly. The implication, that we are either "full in" or "out", is challenging for sure, which makes it even more amazing when we consider all the hard work and commitment it takes from a core group of members to keep our meeting humming along.

Our trustee committee embodies this with a long list of both physical and intellectual work that they have overseen in cooperation with the whole meeting. The list includes the following: tree and grounds maintenance, financial maintenance and planning, fixing, cleaning and replacing things such as the roof, the house clutter, the sewer line, the parking lot. The list goes on and the hardest work may be in doing all these things in a cooperative spirit through Quaker process and consensus. As one member relates:

We "teach and admonish" one another in our meetings by centering into worshipful space, and deeply listening to each other as we share freely the pros and cons of whatever is under consideration. We listen for the leading of the Spirit, and we expect this process to continue as we enter into discussion with Monthly Meeting. Although serving as a Trustee can be challenging at times, it is a joy to participate in this movement of the Spirit.

Another member, who is on the scholarship committee, seems on the same wave-length:

It is enlivening for the Scholarship committee and for the meeting to be able to provide financial support to a worthy young Friend who was awarded a \$1500 scholarship for the current school year. The funds were paid directly to the University where he is enrolled.

And let us not forget the work of the Public Health Committee, never a breeze as they gave up their Saturday mornings and often took some heat in order to keep us safe. Folks rolled up their sleeves and came together on so many occasions. We apologize for neglecting to mention some out of a concern for brevity.

Foremost among these other busy bees and playful breezes have been the people with a heart for human fellowship among us. Fellowship, despite the pandemic, has continued to take place—after meetings, on Saturday evenings, at campgrounds, online on gaming nights, outside on trails and on nature meditations walks and in our ongoing nurture groups. Since this cannot be an exhaustive list, let's go on to the final stanza of our structuring song.

III. Standing Strong/ Lying Down

When I stand, let me stand

Like a tree, strong and tall

And when I lie, let me lie

Like a lake-calm and still,

Refreshingly

Our Quaker testimonies are how we stand strong and tall and create a human ecology rich in the word and manner of Christ. Our strength is in how we remain committed to Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Service. The core of our strength is not in our numbers but in our gratitude for what we have, and have been blessed to cherish and cultivate, in the grace of our relationships. Strong and tall, calm and still, refreshing. This is who we are in meeting for worship or on movie nights with pizza. But we hold a special place in our hearts for the disenfranchised, the denigrated, the displaced and the folks dismissed from the table of bounty by the disjointed nature of unjust human structures. Our peace and social concerns committee has been challenged to rise in the midst of so much fallen human behavior. This has been made even more difficult by—you know what—the pandemic. But for months now our community has attended to the needs of Gilberto Delgado, an immigrant injured on the job who is supporting a family across the border against an unjust system. And more recently, our community has been in support of *World Central Kitchen* to assist in feeding refugees fleeing violence in their home land.

CFM has been called upon to deepen our ties with EquaSion. We signed on to the EquaSion mission statement: *“to engage with people of all faiths to discover our shared humanity and spirituality.”* This agreement implies that we will actively work together with other signed-on communities for an equitable and just community. Our minister and public friend, Jim Newby, spoke on our behalf on Martin Luther King Jr. Day at Cincinnati Music Hall while several of our members joined the multi-communal march and celebrations for justice. This is a good sign of where our heart is as a community, but we must also ask ourselves what would be the next concrete actions that CFM can take to realize the spirit of our commitment? One possible answer to this question is being pursued by ministry and counsel through the planning of worship sharing

sessions centered around our meeting's relationship to new forms of leadership and nurturing, a work that is on-going. Do we need to know the grand steps that come from this before we can agree to commit ourselves more concretely to pursuing it? We must continue to ask ourselves questions like this if we truly want to stand like a tree, strong and tall.

As for lying down from our active pursuits, like a lake-calm and still, we are mindful of the many friends and family we lost in the past year and years. Mary Peck was a long-time member and Jim Crocker-Lakness was a weighty friend as well. We will miss them and the part of ourselves which related particularly to them. When we celebrated Jim's life as a community, we acknowledged a wisdom of brokenness, especially as he neared the end. Most often we find ourselves emphasizing the activities of the living, by the living and for the living, but we know that community is also a place to honor those who lie down from all their earthly joys and struggles. When we remember and acknowledge the gift of these folks, we find a place in our heart of hearts which is deep-down calm and still.

As another poet, Mary Oliver, phrased it, we have this one precious life to live. We live it both as individuals and as community, the last giving context and meaning to the former. We are convinced that the heartbeat of the state of our society at CFM is strong and healthy. The word of Christ dwells richly in us, sometimes quietly, sometime vividly. This reflection is but a small taste of this life. We are grateful to be continuing in it, like the song of the bird-singing for the sheer joy of our lives together. Knowing how much more we have to live and learn and enjoy together, our hearts remain clear as we say: Amen.