

2021 State of the Meeting Report

Lancaster Friends Meeting

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

-John 1:5 (NLT)

For there is always light,
If only we are brave enough to see it,
If only we are brave enough to be it.

-Amanda Gorman

By any measure, 2021 was a significant and challenging year for our Meeting community, as we continually seek to “live up to the light” we have been given.

We began the year in the midst of a deadly “second surge” of Covid, peaking in mid-January 2021—and ended the year with the “omicron surge” setting local records for new cases and hospitalizations. 2021 began with 10:00 worship entirely on Zoom (the smaller 8:00 worship continued meeting in person throughout), but by June, cases were low and with a 97% vaccination rate among eligible adults, we moved to a hybrid model. The relative proportion of in-person and virtual attenders has waxed and waned during the ensuing months but is currently about 50/50. We are greatly indebted to the small core of Friends who have made “technology-assisted worship” possible.

Hybrid worship has been a challenge. We invested in an “Owl” to facilitate hybrid worship, but for those attending virtually, the audio quality especially has left much to be desired. Those attending in-person miss not seeing the faces or hearing the names of virtual attenders, and masks have made it difficult for voices to project and be heard even for those in-person. The overall feeling is that we are doing the best we can, demonstrating commendable flexibility in adapting to unforeseen circumstances. We have managed to preserve some semblance of ourselves as a worshipping community, but it remains to be seen whether our current hybrid model will continue to sustain us into the future.

A small but dedicated group of Friends continues to meet Wednesday evenings on Zoom for mid-week worship. Also, starting in September we have been excited to host a Swahili Worship Group that meets on First-Day afternoon, initiated by our member who was a pastor in Congo Yearly Meeting. We hope this endeavor can grow into a significant outreach to the large Congolese refugee community in Lancaster.

We have greatly missed the informal fellowship of after-meeting refreshments and our monthly potluck meals, which in retrospect we now appreciate as so vital to our life together. One particular concern and sadness is that despite the dedication and creativity of a core group of teachers, it has been difficult for our First Day school program to meet the changing needs of our young people. We look forward to a time in the future when our young people will again be able to fully participate in our community. Although all of us have suffered in this pandemic, we recognize that families with young and school-aged children have borne more than their share of disruption.

Our previously active schedule of 9 a.m. “Meeting for Learning” (formerly, Adult First Day School) and after-meeting forums has been largely on hold, and we feel the absence of opportunities to connect with each other on a deeper level. In November, one of our members

facilitated a three-hour Saturday morning session devoted to the how and why of Quaker worship in our present changed circumstances. About thirty attended, and all appreciated the opportunity to get back to basics. Going forward we hope to offer occasional Saturday morning sessions, with a goal of deepening and strengthening our worship together. One positive pandemic development has been weekly “meeting for singing” prior to meeting for worship, which started when we were only on Zoom but has continued in the hybrid era.

One very significant activity in 2021 was our meeting-wide “Journey Toward Racial Justice.” In the wake of the national reckoning following George Floyd’s death, a core group of Friends created a curriculum of readings and video clips, and then organized us into facilitated discussion groups. These small groups met every two weeks by Zoom for most of the year, with up to sixty Friends participating. Currently, we have reorganized into several groups, each centered around some shared interest in taking a deeper look at various Meeting and local issues through a racial justice lens.

We have every reason to hope that the seeds that have been planted by this program will bear fruit in 2022 and beyond, and already we see some of those fruits. In the wake of a tragic shooting death by police of a local man in a mental health crisis, some Friends joined a grassroots community group in ongoing dialogue with police and the mental health system. This group has now made 22 concrete recommendations, with the goal of improving the system’s ability to respond non-violently to mental health emergencies. Other issues call out for our continued involvement: more equitable state funding for public schools, reform of the cash bail system, housing issues, input on a proposed new county jail, and finding tangible ways to make our Meeting more welcoming to all.

Even with our involvement in these local issues, we share a recognition that in the long run responding to global climate change is the defining challenge of our age. Our very active Environmental Concerns Committee is currently holding internal discussions, discerning next steps for the Meeting. We look forward to hearing their recommendations in the coming months.

Finally, for a number of years some members with a background in education have had a vision of starting a Quaker school, affiliated with the Meeting and guided by Quaker principles. Discussion centered around finances, our tradition of strong advocacy for public schools, and the concern that private schools can easily become inaccessible to those with limited financial means. However, the vision, enthusiasm, and thorough background work of this core group of Friends won over the Meeting, and in January 2021, Meeting for Business endorsed the formation of Lancaster Friends School, with the use of the Meetinghouse for up to three years. The school opened in September 2021, with 26 students and six teachers, four of whom are Meeting members. Lancaster Friends School and the Meeting share a commitment that the school should emphasize service to any marginalized and vulnerable communities among us; in its first year, fully 40% of students come from one of these communities, with a goal of reaching 50% in the coming years. Sharing space and establishing clear lines of communication has stretched and tested us, but overall the Meeting has been gratified with the school’s startup, and pleased with the many ways the school enriches our community. With an eye to increasing enrollment, it appears likely that Lancaster Friends School will be moving to a larger space, perhaps as soon as the fall of 2022.

This past year has been a testimony to our resilience, commitment, and flexibility. Much as we long to go back to “the way things used to be,” we sense that some things have irrevocably changed. Our challenge going forward is now to discern what we find valuable and wish to keep, and what needs to be let go.