

Berkeley Friends Meeting: State of the Meeting Report, 2021

The past year has been one of incredible challenges for many in our Meeting, and yet we have discovered that our community is, perhaps, more resilient than we would have thought possible when we were asked to shelter in our homes last March. Our meeting is one of many that have been holding Meeting for Worship via the internet. We are very aware that not all of our members and attenders find this an adequate replacement for meeting for worship in person, but people for whom attending in person is usually difficult or even impossible, have been able to join us, enriching our community. In this time when we have not been able to be together without risk of infecting one another with COVID-19, this has been the most reasonable way forward. Now that quite a number of us are getting vaccinated, we are looking ahead to the time when we may begin to meet together in person; this brings us hope, but we keep the health of our community members in mind and will not rush into meeting in person without proper safety measures in place.

We have strengthened our community by setting up small locally organized ‘emergency preparedness groups’; some of these meet regularly, virtually or by email, others occasionally. We also have set up informal check-ins open for everybody, three nights a week, which have helped us to remain connected. Other areas of strength are the various programs organized by the Outreach and Nurture Committee, particularly the ongoing monthly poetry discussions and worship sharing sessions. However, the tensions caused by the pandemic’s influence on everyone’s lives also weigh on the interpersonal relationships within the Meeting.

Seven of our members have died in the last year, though not all had COVID-19. During the same period, we have had two people transfer into our Meeting, one withdrew his membership, and one new person joined. Our Nominating Committee has put before us the issue of the decreasing number of people available to do the jobs that we have laid out for ourselves as a Meeting. Perhaps we need to reconsider the structure of our committees, and all of us, members and attenders, should discern more deeply what tasks we are called upon to do now.

In the last year, Meeting has undertaken concerted efforts to focus on racism and its impacts on our community. First we started educating ourselves, by reading books and watching movies together. A number of people read and discussed the book *White Fragility*, as requested by the Pacific Yearly Meeting’s Clerk. We also had a reading by Melissa Valentine who grew up in our meeting; Melissa read from her memoir *The Names of All the Flowers* about her youth as a biracial person in Oakland. We are now starting to read the book *Caste* together with Strawberry Creek Meeting. Our Young Adult Friends (YAFs) group has contributed to these conversations as well, for example, by sponsoring the showing of the film “13th”, which we watched and discussed on line. The next step was the forming of the Racial Justice Action Team, which has been supporting the work of the American Friends Service Committee’s Healing Justice Program, with a focus on alternatives to policing and demilitarization of the police in our local cities. The YAFs are also active in Showing Up for Racial Justice projects. Though our Meeting has had discussions about racism before, none has been this sustained nor involved this many segments of our Meeting community.

Our Immigration Accompaniment Team of the Social and Environmental Action Committee has put a lot of effort, along with Property Committee, into preparing the downstairs level of the Meetinghouse to make it possible for a person recently released from immigration detention to stay there. We hosted our first immigration guest from June 2020–January 2021, assisted by a

number of groups from outside our Meeting, as well as the Resident Friends in the Meetinghouse, and the new Coordinator of our Immigrant Housing Program. We learned many things from having this first person stay in our Meetinghouse and now a second immigrant is staying there. As well as providing temporary housing for these immigration guests, the accompaniment team is also helping other people navigate through the immigration system. We feel so appreciative to everyone involved in this project, including members of our other unprogrammed Berkeley Quaker Meeting, Strawberry Creek Meeting, for helping to actualize it. We also continue to be in touch with the first family that our accompaniment team supported.

A third area where the Meeting has been active is in issues concerning the LGBTQ community, and the YAFs have led us in this, for instance, by opening up a discussion about our pronoun use.

While we find ourselves longing to be back in our Meetinghouse and starting to work through the details of what we will need to do to go back, we have been able to continue making improvements that we had long been considering. In the past year, we finished installing solar panels on the roofs of the Meetinghouse. Many people from the Meeting have appreciated seeing members and attenders whom we haven't seen in years because they live at a distance or are unable to travel, who have been able to attend the Meeting virtually. We will certainly be having conversations about how to make sure that we do not lose this ease of participation when many of us return to the Meetinghouse.

Although the last year has been very challenging, with everyone clearly stretched to their limits by having been shut in their homes for so long, and with such great uncertainties about the future, our Meeting has weathered this period of challenge, and we look forward to further spiritual growth for our Quaker community and involvement in the challenges our larger communities face.