

State of the Meeting Report 2021

Palo Alto Friends Meeting

One year ago, Palo Alto Friends arrived at the painful decision to close the meeting house and suspend in-person worship, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We had no idea how long the hiatus would last, and we had barely begun to explore online alternatives. Our report concluded: “We are now engaged in a collective learning process, adapting our practices to this strange new world, doing our best to renew and enrich our spiritual lives as we gain familiarity with new technologies. We feel confident that our community will emerge from the ordeal strengthened, however long it may be before we can again worship in the same room together.”

In this report, we return to this question: How has Meeting responded to a year of enforced physical separation? Inevitably, the results have been mixed, as have individual experiences and feelings. Friends hunger for a return to closer physical proximity and look forward to this event in the relatively near future. At the same time, virtual versions of worship and other Meeting activities have done much to maintain and enrich our spiritual health and sense of connectedness. One Friend said that when geographical barriers are erased, we have a greater sense of unity, of being one meeting. In some ways our beloved community is stronger and more intimate. We are Quakers in a bigger way.

The Quality of Worship

Meeting for Worship has continued online. This was made possible largely by one dedicated and knowledgeable member who was expert with Zoom and single-handedly set up our meetings and acted as host. She has trained others to host, and so we have been able to continue our worship traditions without interruption. Instead of “coffee hour” after Meeting, we break out into small groups to get better acquainted. One member pointed out that these conversations are often more rewarding than those we were accustomed to.

The following summary is compiled from reflections and comments in small groups as part of Meeting for Business, February 14, 2021, supplemented by additional thoughts via email.

Although initially there was much skepticism about on-line worship, Friends are now grateful for the opportunity to gather via Zoom. Many worshipers say that genuine group worship has been attained. One Friend commented: “I’m a visual person. Seeing people in their homes adds to the intimacy of it.” Having names on faces is another benefit appreciated by many Friends, as they are easier to read than nametags. The small-group breakout rooms after M4W offer a new opportunity to connect closely with Friends we have seen every First Day for years but have not had the chance to get to know. We feel more like a family than an intellectual fellowship.

Not only have we been able to maintain worship and a sense of connectedness, but Zoom meetings have brought unanticipated benefits by expanding our world of participants. Some who were previously isolated in such places as Fresno and Sonora now attend weekly. At least two

Friends who had moved away from Palo Alto and expected to lose contact are now able to join almost every week. Visits from truly long-distance Friends across the country have been more occasional, yet they enrich our experience when they happen.

Although gratitude for online worship is strong, nearly everyone acknowledges that we have also lost important values in our pandemic condition. Friends articulate this sense of loss in diverse ways. Some say they miss the intimacy of human contact, the hugs, the handshakes, the face-to-face eye contact. Others add that they regret the loss of serendipity, the chance encounter with an old acquaintance or a new visitor. Most poignantly, we miss the presence of those have not joined the Zoom meetings, for whatever reasons. Overall online attendance is regularly between 30 and 40, somewhat lower than former levels, and the composition is different. Asked to characterize those who are not there, one Friend suggested: younger families, newcomers, working professionals suffering from excessive Zoom time throughout the week.

Attention to Racial Justice Issues

The Racial Justice Subcommittee of PYM has asked meetings to indicate how they have or have not addressed racial justice issues during the past year. Meeting has not devoted as much attention to this area as we would like. Reading groups have included black Quaker authors in their sessions, such as Bayard Rustin and Vanessa Julye. One of our fundraising walks included a tour of the Lawrence Tract, where we learned about early efforts to promote integrated housing in Palo Alto. In what is perhaps a hopeful development for the future, PAFM was invited to join with two other meetings in a pilot workshop on discussing race, and many Palo Alto Friends participated. The success of that session has led to plans for similar events in future months.

Meeting Activities

The following summaries have been submitted in response to our queries:

Midweek Meeting has continued under our care, and indeed expanded its reach, during the pandemic. A regular group of 9-12 worships together over PAFM zoom each Wednesday evening, a notable increase over past attendance. While many of the regular are from PAFM, there are now ongoing participants from various locations across the country. The sense of community for the group has been very strong, and attenders are finding that online worship is conducive to deep spirit in a group of this size. Often the group will continue for a few minutes of free fellowship afterwards too. Midweek Meeting is grateful for the cross-meeting support and wider fellowship that comes out of this.

The *San Mateo Worship Group* is 2 ½ years old and has a steady attendance of 10-12 people. Members of San Francisco and Palo Alto meetings form the core. SMWG had been meeting twice monthly; now weekly via Zoom in a breakout room of the PAFM account. Several people take part in singing with PAFM before joining SMWG worship in progress. Through our post meeting conversations and outside meeting contacts, a caring community is developing, though participants long for in-person worship experience.

The annual *Harvest Festival* to benefit Friends Committee on Legislation California was necessarily very different in 2020. With persistence and creativity, a small group of volunteers worked to provide an onsite baked goods/jam sale, accompanied by a four-hour online presentation of videos donated by our performers, live interviews with volunteers and customers, and a wonderful pre-recorded message from FCLCA. Treasure Books (thank you San Jose Meeting) were sold online via eBay and Consignment. In the end, we did not raise as much onsite as in previous years, but we also did not have to put in as many hours in preparation and post event. The outcome may affect how we organize future Quaker Harvest Festivals. It continued to be a great team event for our community during this time of isolation.

During the month of December 2020, the Meeting continued its longstanding participation in *Hotel de Zink*, which provides housing and food for the homeless. Social distancing restrictions precluded use of our meeting house for overnight stays. With a deeply spiritual “can do” attitude, the Work in the World Committee worked out an arrangement with Menlo Church, whereby guests would be hosted at the church, and meals would be supplied by PAFM. Twenty-eight of our members provided dinners and weekend breakfasts for fifteen guests. Neighbors of one of our members, who had never been involved before, volunteered to provide snacks every day, to tide over guests between breakfast and dinner. The Meeting's young people prepared Christmas cards—a personal touch which was appreciated by the guests. Donated funds allowed us to present each guest with two \$35 gift cards for Walgreens and Target.

First Day School has continued through Zoom, a small but eager group participating in lessons on the Bible, philosophy, and Quaker history. Because the tradition of baking monthly for the Ecumenical Hunger Project was no longer feasible, young Friends have raised funds for EHP by eliciting pledges, first for virtual walks and then for reading books. The group initiated a “Meet a Quaker” program, inviting an adult to meet with them and respond to questions about their background and life as a Friend. A highlight of the year was the virtual holiday party, featuring a performance of the Christmas story and carol singing, in which the full Meeting took part.

Other Meeting activities that have continued despite the pandemic lockdown include Hymn Singing, Mindfulness Meditation, Exploring Quaker Writings, the El Salvador Projects Group, Adult Education and welcoming events for new members. One new activity is that a few members have brought their computers to the Redwood Grove behind the meeting house, to sit outside and worship while maintaining social distance.

Looking Ahead to Blended Worship

Virtually all respondents say that they hope we can retain the best of both worlds in the future, when we are able to worship in the meeting house. Meeting members are now developing plans for blended worship, to maintain remote access as an option. This change will entail extension of meeting house infrastructure, reconfiguration of seating arrangements, and recruitment of additional co-hosts, to ease the burden on our tech experts who have borne the brunt of the additional tasks created by on-line worship. Even with extensive planning, we will have to adapt over time to our new situation, through experimentation and learning-by-trying. Our experience will no doubt be the subject of next year's State of the Meeting report.