

## State of the Society Report

### Old Chatham Monthly Meeting 2021

*In the past year, what hope, opportunities, stumbling blocks, joys, sorrows, traumas, and/or spiritual awakenings and growth have you experienced? What has surprised you? Have you experienced hope, concern, or uncertainty for the future? What vision (if any) do you have or imagine for the future?*

2021 has been a truly tough year for our meeting. The interruptions to our regular use of the Meetinghouse for worship and First Day School caused by the pandemic have resulted in our losing some regular attenders, particularly most of our families with youth. Though we have gained some new attenders via Zoom, including our first distant member, the general feeling is that the uncertainty generated by losing most of our younger attenders will be hard to overcome.

*How have you addressed the realities, fears, and practical nuts & bolts of meeting during the Covid-19 pandemic as a worship body?*

In December 2020, due to an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in the local area, we once again closed the meetinghouse to in-person gatherings. We continued to hold meeting for worship and committee meetings only on Zoom until July 2021. Despite not being able to gather in the meetinghouse during this period, we were able to hold outdoor gatherings and other activities such as workdays and tree planting.

In July, we once again held blended Meetings, i.e., some Friends worshipping at the meetinghouse and other joining via Zoom. A revised policy on masking and social distancing was developed for this period. Because it was important to us in choosing to meet at the meetinghouse, in addition to wearing masks and distancing, we opened the windows in the meeting room. Good air flow in and out with all the windows in the meeting room was vital for some of us to feel safe meeting in person.

We decided to continue holding in-person worship as long as the five-county local area's seven-day average positive case rate was below 5%. During this time, we made numerous technical improvements to our computer, sound system, and internet connection to support worshipers joining on Zoom. In November 2021-with the Covid positivity rate rising, we reverted to Zoom-only meetings for worship, worship sharing, committee meetings, and women's group meetings.

Since we have Friends worshipping with us from a great distance, the Meeting is committed to holding hybrid in-person and virtual meetings when we are finally able to return to our meetinghouse.

*How has addressing social and political concerns, social justice, personal accountability, political polarization (including structural patterns) --whether in society or your meeting community-- affected the spiritual life of the community?*

Our Outreach Peace and Justice committee has continued to participate in a weekly vigil in Chatham supporting Black Lives Matter and world peace. The representative to our local interfaith group joined in reading books and engaging in discussions around white fragility, as well. Unfortunately, we have had to suspend our outreach potlucks and film series on social justice issues because of the pandemic.

*If you have engaged in anti-racism work, how have you spiritually addressed and integrated becoming actively anti-racist (through worship, discernment, programs etc.)? What spiritual challenges have you encountered in this work?*

We read the NYYM draft statement on anti-racism on several occasions, and at our November business meeting minuted our support for its adoption. We brainstormed how we as individuals and as a Meeting could recognize these issues. We added current books on black history and white supremacy to our Outreach Book Club. Our Bacon Fund awarded nine grants for a total of \$3,000 to local, regional, and international organizations, evaluating how these modest grants might address both immediate needs in communities of color as well as challenge systemic inequities and institutions of white privilege.

*We invite you to share ways the yearly meeting can support the spiritual life of your worship community or anything else you would like to share in response to the prompts on worship, community life, finances, witness, and the meetinghouse.*

Worship: In the beginning, Zoom and hybrid Meetings for Worship didn't seem to work well. There were few messages from those on Zoom. But as time has passed, we are seeing higher attendance and more vocal ministry while meeting online.

One benefit of worshipping from home is that one can choose the space that is conducive to meditation and quiet. Some of us appreciate finding and maintaining an environment at home that feels right for being at meeting for worship.

The loss of attendance by our young families is a major concern to everyone. Other losses such as missing the socialization of being at our meetinghouse, which we built and cherish, can only be partially offset by after-meeting chats on Zoom and the benefit of distant attenders joining worship.

#### Community Life:

Given the back and forth of meeting in person/not meeting in person, the website and newsletter became even more important for maintaining connections to our worship community. We were diligent in keeping the website, the Meeting directory, and the individual email address list updated.

The newsletter, called "Meeting Update," includes a calendar with information on items such as events, worship sharing, women's group, book club, business meeting, and more. It also includes articles on what's going on in our Meeting, at Powell House and NYYM, for all of which Zoom links are provided

Our Ministry and Counsel committee continued to support the spiritual and socio-emotional wellbeing of members and attenders through pastoral care. One task accomplished last year was to update the meeting's membership policy. This reflected the changes in the 2021 revision of NYYM's Faith & Practice and included a new membership policy for children and youth.

We also implemented a policy for hosts to leave the Zoom meeting open after meeting for worship, giving space for those attending to engage in conversation, whether casual or heartfelt. This helps

increase connections among long-time members and provides ways to get to know newer attendees better.

Besides our younger families, it was very hard losing a few folks who did not feel comfortable attending worship on Zoom or following our Covid protocols. There was little opportunity to follow up with the occasional visitor or attendee that came when we were open.

Some social events took place. Before the meetinghouse reopened in June, the clerk facilitated a well-attended Covid-safe campfire gathering to assess the concerns and needs of folks around the possibility of reopening. The socialization afterwards showed how much we had missed seeing each other in person. Once opened, we had a lovely welcoming at the meetinghouse in July for two new local members and one in October for our first distant member from Texas who traveled here with his wife to meet us in person. Deep gratitude was expressed by our new members and by our community in being able to host them.

Even though we have gone through periods of closing the meetinghouse, we were blessed with two rentals that turned out to be beautiful occasions for the guests attending. The first was a wedding of close neighbors who walked to and from the Meetinghouse with their guests. The couple said their vows and wed in the presence of a small number of friends and family and proceeded to hold their reception at their own house. The second was a memorial meeting for a friend who had attended OCMM in the past and was beloved by many guests from other paths in life. Both parties were very pleased and grateful for the opportunity to hold these simple but meaningful events in the atmosphere of our meeting room.

Sadly, we were unable to open to all a planned in-person memorial meeting for our dear friend Gene Braun. A blended service for family in-person and extended family on Zoom was held instead.

Toward the end of the year, the Quaker Intentional Village-Canaan (QIVC) held a one-day working retreat at the meetinghouse, where they practiced distancing, wore masks, and opened the windows. They were grateful to have the Covid-free safe space.

*Finances:* Budget changes were modest in the past year. The budget provides the physical and virtual space for us to meet, thus supporting our spiritual life. Our budget supports resources such as buying books for the children, sending people to conferences, Friends Journal gift subscriptions, and helping NYYM operate and support our spiritual life. We are aware that individual households have been affected financially by the pandemic, but overall, the members of our worship community have not experienced so severe an economic impact as that seen in the wider society.

*Ministry to Children and Youth:* Covid isolation was (and is) very much a stumbling block for our Children and Youth program. Although Zoom helps with other age groups, many of our children and youth already had too much screen time as part of their education, and almost none have attended meeting for worship remotely anytime in the last year. Our most successful and encouraging event was planting daffodil bulbs outside the meeting room. A do-it-at-home craft, an outside nature walk, and our annual book gifts (including books by and about people of color) were also positive experiences.

In December, Melinda Wenner Bradley from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting conducted a Zoom presentation on Welcoming Families and Youth for us. She inspired us to consider new ways of inviting young families and confirmed that rebuilding our program may take as long as five or six years. Her ideas encouraged us greatly, though only a few people attended.

Meetinghouse: How has Covid affected the body of the meeting as it is externalized in a physical meetinghouse? Often it is said the home is the extension of the self, or even the soul. It has been noted that it is a little eerie to arrive at the meetinghouse and find the parking lot covered in grass with signs of deer making themselves at home in the weedy gardens. It almost felt as though the vacant, dark building invited nature to come closer for company. The meeting house seemed to act out this neglect by flooding its basement for the first time and allowing its heating system to falter with corrosion. The Wi-Fi router even stopped sharing information. Like the boy who cried wolf, the repeated false fire alarms continued to call the fire department to come visit at random hours. The entire building now looks older, in need of repair and paint. One wonders if our remote hearts to God will show up with hands to work.

Our vision for the future remains more half-full than half-empty. Our community continues to find heartfelt expression in worship. We accept that change is a constant yet accept that we find our center by adapting to life's conditions. Old Chatham Monthly Meeting's heart beats strongly. We grieve our losses wholeheartedly yet strive to continue to provide support and a spiritual home for all.