

## Old Chatham Monthly Meeting 2020 State of the Meeting Report

*Query: How have you experienced Spirit working in these times? What impact, positive or negative, have these challenging times had on your meeting spiritually, organizationally, financially, and in your life as a community? What unexpected joys and benefits, if any, has your meeting experienced? In these uncertain times, how are you led by the Light to recognize and experience possibilities for renewal and rebirth?*

2020 was a challenging year for everyone, and not the least for our Quaker Meeting. The coronavirus pandemic has changed the world in so many ways and has required considerable flexibility and adaptation. As a meeting we learned many things in 2020: that it is possible to have a Meeting for Worship on Zoom and that having a spiritual connection with one another does not depend on sitting in the same room; that caring for one another and connecting with one another does not have to die away when we are not together every Sunday at the meetinghouse; that even without our monthly potluck lunches we can still have a casual chat session after Meeting for Worship; that it is possible to have a memorial service on Zoom. Not every experience has been totally positive, but we have grown and learned from them, and continue to do so even though we are still not back to using the meetinghouse. We look forward to the day when we can do so, but we are prepared to weather the interval until then with a strong, supportive, and connected meeting community.

*What has happened to the quality of worship during this time?*

The year began on a positive note with our very successful January retreat with Christopher Sammond on deepening worship. We had plans for further exploration, including having a workshop on the ARCH program, but the coming of the pandemic paused all such plans. We both gained and lost attendance through the use of Zoom and blended meetings during the pandemic. On the positive side we gained both new and renewed attenders, the main advantage being that folks out of easy driving range could attend, both from our local area and from as far away as Texas and Florida. We saw the return of some members and former members who had moved out of the area to be near family or to live in retirement communities. It has been wonderful to welcome these old friends back into our community. On the negative side, we have lost many of our younger attenders, including virtually all of the families with children and youth, whether for technology or other reasons. This is of great concern to us, and will continue to be addressed in 2021. As we gradually became accustomed to worshipping on Zoom, and worked out some technical issues, we settled into a comfort zone where people once again felt led to speak.

When the option to reopen became a possibility, we formed a committee (ROOF, for Reopening Old Chatham Friends), and surveyed our members and attenders, developing protocols that met or exceeded the state guidelines for safe reopening. This included requiring that masks be worn at all times. When we installed air conditioning in the meetinghouse this spring, we added a highly rated air purifier and established additional procedures for cleaning and sanitation. We reopened as a blended meeting, and for a period of time a small number of us attended for Sunday Meeting for Worship, serving as greeter, usher, tech host, etc. with most of the remainder of our attendees choosing to still worship on Zoom. A late summer/early fall increase in coronavirus

cases across the state caused us to reconsider that model, and it was decided that the meetinghouse would be closed until the pandemic had settled down and there was a vaccine in place, with time for most of us to get vaccinated. Thus, we attended via Zoom, and continue to do so currently. Ministry & Counsel ensures that each Zoom meeting has a technical host as well as a closer, to make the practical aspects of a Zoom session run as smoothly as possible, though technical issues still disrupt occasionally.

We have maintained an emphasis on pastoral care throughout the year with regular phone or email contact and sharing the status of those in need. Our lack of ability to meet in person has not stopped our sending out support and care for each other. We have had to deal with the death of two members, and have modified our memorial meetings to accommodate them on Zoom.

We have continued to explore how to foster spiritual growth in our community outside of Meeting for Worship. We have explored scheduling new meetings for learning on topics garnered from our members' experiences, and how to present popular topics such as AVP and vocal ministry. These will happen in 2021 and beyond. We have also maintained our weekly electronic newsletter with reminders of all of our recurring activities such as Worship Sharing, OPJ events, our Women in Aging group, etc., and are also encouraging folks to be aware of NYYM and Powell House offerings.

*What has been the financial impact?*

Most members of our Meeting community have maintained financial stability throughout the pandemic and that was reflected in the sustained level of giving that the Meeting experienced in 2020. We came close to raising the income budgeted and had a small year-end surplus because of reduced expenditures on meetinghouse operating expenses and childcare. We did lose income from rentals and fundraisers, but this had insignificant impact because almost all of our Meeting's income comes from individual donations.

It's worth noting that the Meeting as a whole reflected on how we might financially help others during these trying times and took some steps in response. We were grateful to be able to direct some NYYM grant funds to a local organization supporting undocumented immigrants, and we gave a higher amount than usual to the local food pantry. We also increased the Meeting's financial commitment to two affiliated institutions that are important to our Meeting: Powell House and the Yearly Meeting.

*How have the Meeting's outreach efforts been affected?*

The active work of OPJ (Outreach, Peace & Justice) continued unabated in 2020. OPJ's monthly committee meetings, though on Zoom, continued to have prolonged and profound discussions on how to bridge the political divide in our country and how to unite around common goals, as well as how to listen effectively. Discussions were lively yet thoughtful, with good listening and reflecting. Some highlights included:

- Applied for grants from the NYYM's Barrington Dunbar Fund for the Columbia County Sanctuary Movement's Mano-a-Mano fund supporting local immigrants.

- Applied for a grant from the Lindley Murray Fund of NYYM to give help to spread the movement in use at Soul Fire Farm and to purchase copies of the book *Farming While Black; Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation of the Land*.
- Applied to NYYM's Witness Coordinating Committee for funds to help support our ongoing film and planned book club programs.
- Continued our film presentations, utilizing WMHT films streamed over the internet, followed by discussions on Zoom. We miss having the pre-film potlucks and look forward to resuming those in the future.
- Initiated a Book Club, inviting the sharing of perspectives on books that focus on race issues, to begin in early 2021.
- Continues to work on a statement on Black Lives Matter to bring to Meeting for Business.
- Additionally, on the recommendation of OPJ, the Meeting endorsed and sent to Congressman Delgado the FCNL letter supporting the removal of President Trump.
- Also, the Meeting sent a letter to Congressman Delgado endorsing HR 2407 (Promoting Human Rights for Palestinian Children Living Under Israeli Occupation Act).
- Additionally, the Meeting sent to local legislators a letter supporting HALT, which calls for the elimination of Solitary Housing Units in NYS prisons.

Given the economic stresses induced by the coronavirus pandemic, the Committee for our Bacon Fund for Peace and Justice decided not to solicit donations from our many sustaining donors this year. We anticipate resuming allocations soon to peace and justice programs in and beyond our community.

*How have programs for children and youth been affected?*

With the meetinghouse closed, and parents reluctant to have children experience even more screen time than they already have during the week for school, our children and youth programs have been low-key. We miss having the children at Meeting for Worship. The Children and Youth Committee (CYC) created craft packages to send home to the children, which then were shared on short Zoom sessions, and we worked with Powell House to be able to use their grounds for family-oriented activities. We look forward to resuming a more active program when we are able to begin using the meetinghouse again.

*Overview*

Overall, 2020 was an interesting yet challenging year, during which we believe we kept our sense of community, supported one another as possible, and continued to share and laugh together, even at a distance. We hope to continue our resilience and adaptability to the challenges presented by the pandemic. We are giving continued thought to and focus on what use we make of the land we are blessed with and how to best manage it, on how we would describe our meeting, and on how we can continue to grow spiritually as a worship community. We recognize that these challenges are both external and internal as we combat the forces of isolation, mental and emotional stress, and Zoom fatigue. And of course, we all look forward to being able to return to worship in our beloved meetinghouse sooner rather than later.