

State of the Meeting Report (April 2023)

For Strawberry Creek Meeting, this past year has been one of transition on multiple levels, and the process has been challenging. We have shifted from Zoom-only to "blended" (Zoom and in-person) Meeting for Worship. We have been examining our diverse spiritual and physical needs for accessing worship. We now recognize that we won't be returning to the Meeting we once were, and are seeking new ways towards thriving again.

Meeting for Worship centers our community. Careful planning by a dedicated re-opening committee led to resuming Meeting for Worship in-person in early May 2022, connected to Meeting on Zoom. Creating our blended worship has been particularly challenging because we are renters. A core tech team stepped up to implement the necessary technology, and to recruit, train, and organize the extra volunteers needed to set up and take down equipment each Sunday. There is much appreciation for the volunteers who make it possible for us to hear and see one another, including the major contributions of Worship and Ministry and Facilities Committees, and for the greater inclusivity of the blended Meetings. Those most involved feel well-used, but also worn out, as expressed by this person: *I am a bit drained after 2 ½ years on re-opening and tech committees... I enjoy supporting the meeting's need with my knowledge, but... feel like others could be a bit more engaged in making our 'blending' function.* To lighten the load, we are now experimenting with blended worship twice a month and "parallel" (separate Zoom and in-person) worship on the other weeks.

What have been our experiences of worship over the last year? Some can sink into deeper worship in person, some can connect only via Zoom because of disability, geography, or health issues, some find Zoom or in-person equally rich spiritually, some find the technology distracting on Zoom or in-person, and some find Zoom more convenient. Typically, 30-40 people attend on Zoom, and about 15-20 attend in person. A few have expressed dismay that Meeting now may be an on-line community with an in-person component. In contrast, one person shared: *I am not able to go in-person because I'm immunocompromised. I'm unbelievably grateful for Meeting on Zoom. I feel threatened when someone says that they don't like people not coming in-person.* There are also differing views about having parallel Meetings on some weeks: some think this is needed because it requires fewer volunteers, some find it desirable because they appreciate worship without technology, and some are uncomfortable with having separate Meetings. One person asked: *Is "separate but equal" alright, or even right?*

Mixed viewpoints and feelings have been expressed in several recent listening meetings; sometimes the same individual feels pulled in conflicting directions. The following are some examples: **A.** *I feel grateful for and protective of Meeting, and I also feel tempted to walk away.* **B.** *Meeting is strong, but also floundering.* **C.** *I'm both grateful and drained; purposeful and burdened.* **D.** *I feel pride and concern; appreciate the resilience and patience; know the importance of our Meeting community to all.* **E.** *I have good memories of being in-person, feeling a strong gathered sense, and I haven't felt that via Zoom. I can't come in person. Many of us don't have a choice about how we attend meeting. I'd like it to always be blended, but want it to be a positive experience for everyone.*

Listening Matters Our process for voicing our needs, listening to the needs of others, and making life-giving decisions, is a work in progress with room for improvement. One person shared: *There is a burden when so many folks don't seem to listen to other's needs ... I realize that change can be difficult, but we need to relax a bit as we discover our new possibilities. Be happy ... we are together!!!* Another said: *I do wish to be part of SCMM, unless it gets too uncomfortable for me because of not being listened to.* Another shared: *Our Meeting is not a product, but rather a web of relationships. When you're on a roller coaster ride, you are kind of paralyzed, just trying to survive. When you get off the roller coaster you can notice that you have a cramp in your leg. You pause and see what's happened. We are just a little cranky. I get to know who you are when you're cranky. ... At a deep level we are doing well.* Another said: *I'm feeling pretty exhausted by the state of the world, which can hinder my full attention to Spirit. What helps me is community and all the ways that we care for each other, support each other, mourn our losses, celebrate our joys.* After three years of stressors, we are experiencing some rough edges, but also the deeper connection that comes from speaking honestly, listening with tenderness, and seeking to make Spirit-led decisions.

Members and Attenders

Joys: There is joy in worshipping again in-person, in continuing to worship by Zoom, and in being connected through blended worship. Welcoming newcomers also makes us glad, though there have been few over the past year.

Losses/Longings: We have mourned the loss of three beloved members who passed away last year. A few members have chosen to lay down or transfer their membership, and others are inactive. We feel the absence and loss of these Friends once active in the Meeting. Another significant loss has been the absence of children. News about children is received with enthusiasm, and we are hopeful that they will return this spring. One person shared: *I need a multigenerational community to be helped in listening to Spirit. 'Out of the mouths of babes...' I believe youth sees things with fresh eyes and open hearts. Their absence in our community pains me.* We long for more young adults in our midst and the enhanced vibrancy that the presence of younger voices can bring.

Avenues for Connection Familiar opportunities for spiritual sharing in small groups have been missing this year: Friendly Sevens, Spiritual Life Learning Groups, spring and fall retreats, Quaker Action Worship Group, and worship-sharing on third Sundays. On the other hand, we have benefitted from our relationships through committee work, after-meeting programs on Zoom, and conversations in Zoom break-out rooms and in the courtyard following worship. Two ongoing elder's groups share life's joys and struggles; and there is rich content in our monthly newsletter. A small group meets for mid-week worship by Zoom, and the Oakland Worship Group meets on Sundays at 5pm at a member's home. Our Mutual Care committee has responded to individual needs for grocery shopping, rides, and house visits; has organized sending caring notes to those ill or bereaved; and has provided a helping presence for several Friends approaching their final days of life. We value connection. One person said: *It's the network of relationships that has got me through.* Another shared: *I feel we're forming the future as we find deep connections with the testimonies and each other.* One said: *Connection is what I need and get from the meeting.* We anticipate that more small group gatherings next year will increase the connecting flow of spiritual life among us.

Ministry rooted in our Meeting The ministries of individual members are rooted in the Meeting community, which guides and strengthens their work through spiritual sustenance, accompaniment, eldering, anchoring committees, and expressions of gratitude for their contributions. These individual ministries include Earthcare, anti-racism, eldering, housing security, disability rights, indigenous concerns, hospice, and leadership in Quaker organizations, such as Pacific Yearly Meeting, Quaker Earthcare Witness, and Friends General Conference. A corporate witness of our meeting was expressed in 2021 through the creation of the Community Sharing Fund, to support East Bay community recipients that are responding to the impacts of the Pandemic, with a particular focus on addressing the disproportionate impacts on communities of color. Although inactive this past year, we anticipate reactivating the fund in 2023, as part of our desire to be more engaged in spirit-led action within our wider community.

Our Testimony on Earthcare (2010), Minute on the Climate Crisis (2014), and Minute on Uprooting and Dismantling Racism (2020) continue to inspire us. Through Zoom sessions organized by Peace, Earthcare and Social Witness committee, and our Power, Privilege, and Race subcommittee, we have explored these complex issues. Most recently, these two groups partnered with PYM Indigenous Concerns Subcommittee in showing a film, The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code; they have planned two additional sessions on historical and ongoing negative impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery on Indigenous peoples and all of life on this planet. Our understanding of the interconnections between caring for Earth and uprooting systemic racism has grown. One person said: *The Minute and the Testimony are not different at all, we need to grapple with them as one concern. ... We can't look at it in terms of results. It's just the fact that we're doing the work and each time we go a little deeper. I'm grateful our meeting is doing this work together.* It is heartening that many Friends are consistently participating, learning and growing together, and building trust with each other to go deeper.

Seeing who we are and looking towards the future There continues to be much gratitude and appreciation expressed for our Meeting and for one another. We also recognize that our capacities are reduced due to aging and diminishing numbers. The energy needed for transitions and new formats has been exhausting, even divisive, when we haven't listened well. Stresses created by the pandemic have exacerbated the task for Nominating committee to fill our many committees. At a recent Re-visioning meeting, we shared priorities, along with how things might need to change. Suggestions included reducing both the number of committees and the number of people on committees, relying more on short-term volunteering, and changing the location of in-person worship. We are regaining our footing, and now see that longing for, or even expecting a return to the past, is neither possible, nor desirable. Through listening to our diverse voices and following the leadings of Spirit, we are beginning to envision the future of our Meeting community, recognizing that the fundamental way we worship together is still the same, no matter what the format. We seek to listen deeply, with open hearts.