

**Bethesda Friends Meeting  
Spiritual State of the Meeting Report for 2021**

Baltimore Yearly Meeting asks each of its constituent monthly meetings to prepare and submit annually a report on the Spiritual State of the Meeting (SSOM). This SSOM report for Bethesda Friends Meeting (BFM) was developed by the Ministry and Worship Committee (M&W) for consideration by the monthly meeting.

To aid the Meeting in assessing the spiritual state of the Meeting, M&W adapted several queries offered by the Yearly Meeting. We gathered input on the queries through several pathways:

- We requested views on the queries from each committee. A number of committees reported rich discussions on the issues.
- We solicited feedback from individual Friends via email, the BFM website, and our Facebook page.
- We made a special effort to reach out individually to newcomers who had participated in our meetings for worship during 2021. Many of those newcomers appreciated the outreach and provided thoughtful feedback.
- We held group discussions on the queries, via Zoom, during worship-sharing on February 13, at a post-worship session on February 20, and at coordinating gathering on February 27.
- A draft of this report was discussed at Meeting for Worship with a concern for business on March 6.

M&W received a rich collection of input on the queries, and we sincerely thank all of those who responded. This response itself is witness to the community's caring nurture and its attention to the spiritual state of our Meeting. The report below is based on our synthesis of the input we received.

In 2021, as for most of 2020, the Meeting's life was shaped by constraints created by the COVID-19 pandemic. We offered a hybrid meeting for worship (combining a Zoom videoconference with Friends gathering in person either outside or in the meeting room), with most participants joining by Zoom. Beginning in the summer of 2021, we were able to use technology shared with us by Sidwell Friends School, which allowed for better audio and visual connections between Zoom and in-person participants. All of our meetings for business, committee meetings, programs and fellowship were conducted on Zoom.

***Spiritual Nourishment:***

***Do you feel helped in your spiritual journey by your involvement in Bethesda Friends Meeting? Do you feel able to share your spiritual life with others in BFM? What might we do to further nourish the spiritual state of the Meeting, and help you on your spiritual journey?***

Support on spiritual journey. Many Friends reported, some with enthusiasm, that the Meeting had provided spiritual support to them over the course of 2021. There was a general sense of gratitude for the Meeting holding together during the challenges of the past year. One Friend

wrote: “I feel nourished by the time I dedicate to silence, and the ability to do it in community with others is crucial. I would not be able to set aside the time, energy, and focus on my spiritual well-being if I didn’t have the structure of a Meeting for Worship.”

One member commented, “It is in the small groups that I often feel I can most open up about my spiritual life and share it.” Many felt able to share their spiritual lives in the many groups that have thrived in the past year, including the Spiritual Formation Program, Experiment with Light, the Comparative Religions Group, the Quaker Book Group, the Spiritual Coffee House, and the mid-week Meeting for Worship. Some mentioned that the virtual coffee hour following Meeting for Worship has been rich and often deep. Others mentioned feeling a sense of spiritual connection and support in their committee work.

Outreach. Friends mentioned feeling helped by individual outreach from others in the Meeting during this time. Several mentioned the care extended by the Pastoral Care Committee, while another Friend felt very comforted by rich friendships in the Meeting during this time. In one or two cases, however, we heard reports of Friends feeling disconnected or unwelcomed, and wishing there had been more outreach. We do wonder about our members and attenders who are not participating in worship or other Meeting events.

Ministry in Meeting for Worship has become less frequent. Several respondents noted that messages in Meeting for Worship inspired them, but that since we moved to a remote and then hybrid structure for Meeting for Worship, the frequency of vocal ministry has declined. It was observed that in many meetings, we have had no messages at all. Some said that they appreciate offered messages, and that they find Meeting without messages less nourishing. One Friend noted: “I do miss good ministry.”

Committees as a place for building relationships. A number of Friends commented on feeling connectedness and satisfaction through their work on committees. This related both to working together in a small group on the committee’s activities, and using committee meetings as opportunities for learning about and connecting with fellow committee members. In some cases, Friends have chosen not to participate in remote Meeting for Worship, but continue to find joy in committee engagement. One appreciated committee interactions as “very real and human.”

How we worship. There are a range of expressed feelings about *how* we hold Meeting for Worship, and how the mechanics might affect spiritual nourishment. There is a great heterogeneity of views within our community on these issues.

Hybrid. The meeting has offered a hybrid Meeting for Worship for most of 2021. The hybrid meeting structure allows for participation by those who live at a distance, who are not easily able to travel to the meeting house, or who do not now feel comfortable from a health perspective worshipping in person. One Friend, who lives at a distance, said the possibility of worshipping with us in this way has been a huge support during the pandemic when she has felt very isolated.

Zoom participation. On a typical First Day, 35-45 Friends participate via Zoom in our hybrid Meeting for Worship. Several commented that they appreciated the opportunity to

worship together this way during the pandemic. One Friend expressed particular appreciation for the way that Zoom allows her to see each face clearly and hold each person in the Light; she can also hear more clearly.

Others found that participation in Meeting for Worship via Zoom is unsatisfying or less satisfying than participating in person. In some cases, that has caused Friends not to participate at all; in others, it has led Friends to participate in person. Some found it difficult to find a place in their home that allows for quiet contemplation during Zoom Meeting for Worship.

In-person participation. In 2021, the range of in-person attendees for our hybrid Meeting for Worship was approximately 5-20, with 8-10 being typical. (We have applied rules throughout on self-screening, masking, social distancing, and, once available, vaccination.) Some expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to worship in person.

One Friend urges the Meeting to suspend in-person meeting, both to better protect the health of our worshippers, and more broadly to model cautious, respectful, peaceful behaviors.

Others eagerly await a time when more people are worshipping together in the Meeting House.

Concerns about what it would mean to “get back to normal.” In discussion, some reacted strongly to mentions of “reopening” or “getting back to normal” with concern that those participating by Zoom may feel pressured to come back in person before they are comfortable doing so, or that those participating by Zoom may be seen as holding back a return to “normal.”

Midweek meeting. One Friend expressed appreciation for the midweek worship: “I participate primarily in the mid-week meeting via email and have found it to be very welcoming and supportive . . . even though we do not meet in person or via Zoom/virtually.”

Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business. One concern raised was that our Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business feel too much like “business meetings” with often predictable outcomes, and that we may have lost the time and space for spiritual consideration and community discernment of important, open-ended questions. They asked: “Can ways be found to discern worthwhile changes in our Meeting practices and address our findings with love and creativity?”

Busy-ness of our Meeting. A couple of Friends noted how very busy Bethesda Friends Meeting is, with many committees and activities, and wondered if the testimony of simplicity may counsel the Meeting to focus on fewer activities and ambitions.

Memorial services. Memorial services were a sorrow and a challenge, but there was also a joy in having so many people being able to participate via videoconference.

Children in the meeting. We have had very little participation by children in our meetings for worship, and parents report a strong feeling that their children are “Zoomed out.” In 2021, however, our young Friends undertook several service projects, in which they engaged the whole community, and for many, this felt like a great way to stay connected to families who helped with the projects. Young Friends organized several virtual “game nights,” which were greatly appreciated. The children also participated in a virtual presentation of the Christmas story. (The restart of First Day School in February of 2022 has brought the sounds of excited children back to the meeting house.) The participation of children in the life of the Meeting, however that might occur, is a source of joy.

***Joys, Sorrows, and Challenges:***

***What have been the joys, sorrows, and challenges of Bethesda Friends Meeting in the past year? Do you feel supported in your joys, sorrows, and challenges by our Meeting?***

Sharing of joys and sorrows. Friends generally reported feeling well-supported by the Meeting community when they have shared sorrows or challenges. The sharing of joys and sorrows at the end of Meeting for Worship is appreciated, and has taken on added significance. “Knowing about other people’s joys and sorrows opens our hearts to them.” Friends reported that, in the absence of fellowship opportunities such as in-person coffee hour, the sharing of joys and sorrows can be a way to get to know more about others in our community. Making space for sharing and “check ins” in regular committee meetings was also appreciated as an opportunity learn about others.

Fellowship. Many were grateful for the range of opportunities to connect this past year in group settings via Zoom. Some felt their opportunities for group participation had increased because Zoom eliminated travel time and allowed them to attend more events. However, a number of friends reported that they miss the joy of in-person fellowship – talking with other friends face-to-face, be it at a coffee hour, pot luck, or small group meetings. Creative attention to how we might recreate and enhance informal fellowship opportunities in a manner that is consistent with pandemic sensitivities seems to be a priority.

Our adaptability. We received comments indicating gratitude for how well the Meeting managed to stay together during this challenging time, to continue worshipping together, and to arrange for a wide array of offerings and opportunities for fellowship in small groups. One Friend noted that while it is harder for her to feel spiritually connected when in virtual meetings, she also thinks she is in the process of developing this skill, and that we as a group are in the process of developing these kinds of skills to adapt to changing circumstances. “Only unfolding truth reveals our way forward.”

Newcomers. It is a joy that we continue to have newcomers, both via Zoom and in person. Many expressed feeling very welcomed, and being inspired by the range of activities available in addition to Meeting for Worship. There is a challenge, however, in integrating newcomers where the opportunities for one-on-one fellowship are limited.

Missing in-person Meeting for Worship. One reported that “It has been an on-going sorrow not to be present with others for Meeting for Worship (or if present, to have few people there, sitting 6’ apart, and masked). I’ve kind of gotten used to this sorrow, but sometimes it just wells up for me very strongly, and I can almost ache with the missing of this.”

The challenge of world events. Our spiritual lives are impacted by the extremely painful and challenging events in our world. One member reported feeling despondent about the state of the world, but feeling comforted by the strength and support of this community. Another Friend said it is impossible for him to separate his spiritual state from the “hammer blows” of injustice, cruelty, racism, and war. He wondered what spiritual practices can stand up to this. For him Quaker faith and practice is the best he has found, but it is still very difficult.

Continued attention to anti-racism. The Meeting continues to work on anti-racism issues. In October, we held a well-attended threshing session on how the community understands, and should respond to, the BYM “Call for Action” on Systemic Racism. And we asked committees to consider and report on actions they have taken, or will take, to address diversity and racism issues. One committee reported feeling particularly enriched by their group discernment of how to address these issues.

Joy. Despite the significant constraints imposed by the pandemic, many Friends reported feeling very positive about the opportunities afforded to them by Bethesda Friends Meeting for spiritual nurture, connection, and fellowship. At this time in particular, however, there is a hunger for more joy, and many look forward to opportunities to foster such joy. One Friend helpfully noted that we should not be waiting for some future time to feel joy, but should instead find ways to nurture it and experience it right now.