

## Atlanta Friends Meeting State of the Meeting Report 2013

We have felt a deepening in the quality of worship in our gathered body this year. We continue to struggle to find the right balance between the disciplines of preparation and promptness and the desire to be welcoming and sensitive to the many demands our members feel. We are encouraged that Friends are participating in a variety of small group activities during the week - spiritual nurture groups, Bible study, singing before worship, mid-week meetings and the Adult First Day program – which provide opportunities for us to “know each other in that which is eternal.” We provide opportunities monthly for Friends to share their spiritual journeys and have found both the delivery and the listening to be a rich and intimate experience. Clearness committees continue to flourish in our community and we anticipate continued education on their use an spiritual nature.

We have experienced great richness in the last year as leadings for new ministries have emerged in our community. We are experimenting with ways to support and recognize these ministries more formally so that they may deepen in faithfulness. We are encouraged both by Friends who take up new ministries as well as those who sensitively lay down those ministries for which the call has ebbed.

In seeking to treasure the spiritual richness, we have struggled as a community to balance the desire to share through announcements the many activities of our meeting with the desire to sustain the deep spiritual centeredness of our worship. We are experimenting with new practices to serve our community.

AFM was pleased to welcome three Friends into membership (one by transfer) in 2013. In addition, we approved two Friends' requests to be sojourning members of AFM while they are away from their home meetings and worshipping with us. We were also blessed with the birth of two new babies into our community.

The Care and Counsel Committee (C&C) had 10 committed members, which made their tasks manageable. They greatly enjoyed a half-day retreat early in the year at which they shared personal journeys and set priorities for the year.

Recognizing those who have contributed to our Meeting was an important theme. C&C presented beautiful cards to persons who played significant roles in fostering the Meeting in its early years. These cards contained a beautifully designed text expressing appreciation for the role these “pioneers” played in creating the Meeting we share today. In addition, they contacted persons whom we had not seen for a while and one member promptly followed up with newcomers who signed our list. The Meeting also prepared and approved a “Minute of Recognition and Appreciation of Service,” to acknowledge all those who share their gt expressing appreciation for the role these “pioneers” played in creating the Meeting we share today. In addition, they contacted persons whom we had not seen for a while and one member promptly followed up with newcomers who signed our list. The Meeting also prepared and approved a “Minute of Recognition and Appreciation of Service,” to acknowledge all those who share their gifts with the Meeting in formal roles.

To better coordinate care concerns, C&C updated its list of care volunteers. They also designated a monthly point person to receive requests for assistance from the Meeting community, sometimes addressing the requests directly and other times with assistance from others on the committee or persons who expressed willingness to help.

C&C presented a forum on financial planning and elder law and began planning for future forums on other topics related to the elder years. The committee also managed “Friendly 8s” groups.

C&C, with the Ministry and Worship Committee, helped to arrange memorial services for long-time AFM member Janet Ferguson; for Don DeBra, husband of long term attender, Dee DeBra and father of Elizabeth DeBra; and for Elva Mae Stanley Moore, the mother of attender Kelli Moore.

Quaker Quest was a wonderful experience for our community in 2012, and from it we have further deepened our connections with one another and continued to be enriched by new attenders. As we seek to invite and encourage the participation of newcomers, we are keenly aware of our continuing need to help these new friends develop an understanding of our faith community and a deepening sense of belonging.

We completed the first year of Quaker Voluntary Service volunteers in our community. We actively nurtured the seven volunteers in the program and were enriched by their presence within the Meeting. Fortunately, many of them have stayed in Atlanta and continue to be active in the community. We are now enjoying the presence of the second year’s volunteers who are working in the larger community and participating in the life of the Meeting.

This year, the high school class noticeably increased in size, nearly exponentially at some points. We came to have a shortage of drivers to SAYF retreats, and all volunteers were lovingly accepted and appreciated. Their classes mostly had queries or discussion topics themed on sexuality, retreat planning, views on drugs/alcohol, and spirituality in relation to their friends, family and daily lives. Early in 2014, they will host a SAYF retreat at AFM, and begin to volunteer occasionally to do the First Day volunteer jobs for the Meeting.

In response to concerns for the wellbeing of all children who participate in the life of the Meeting and to assure compliance with new State laws on child protection, AFM approved Guidelines for Child Safety. The job responsibilities for the Young Friends Coordinator were revised to include clear leadership in protecting all our children.

The spiritual life of the Meeting was further enhanced through our annual Gathered Meeting Retreat. Fifty adults and 15 children attended; the theme was “Playing in the Spirit.” Further, we held a Couple Enrichment weekend retreat to nurture spiritually the bonds between committed couples in the Meeting.

To bridge differences in language and worship style, meeting attenders from the U.S. and Burundi prepared a 142-page spiral-bound booklet of hymns and carols in English and Kirundi, Burundian Friends’ first language. We find common ground and individual meaning in singing before meeting for worship or carol singing at Christmas when each person can sing the same hymn in his or her own language.

Living the testimony of equality remains an important spiritual concern for AFM. In 2013, the Meeting reinvigorated its efforts to undo racism through supporting personal change, making AFM a more welcoming spiritual home for all, and addressing racism in our society. Through our discernment, we formed Quakers for Racial Equality (QRE), which replaces Our Roles as Individuals in America's Racial History (ORAIARH) and works in tandem with the Committee on Undoing Racism in Atlanta Friends Meeting (CURAFM). We held an "Understanding Racism through Understanding White Privilege" workshop and the Adult First Day group 3 discussed the pamphlet, *Living Our Testimony of Equality: A White Friend's Experience*. QRE also staffed a weekly literature table on issues related to racial equality, and once a month offered a Listening Ear for concerns about racism. QRE committee members gave a workshop at the Southern Appalachian Young Friends retreat and offered Religious Education classes on equality and justice for our middle school Friends. QRE also surveyed young friends to select listeners and developed guidelines for offering a Listening Ear for Youth.

In the area of societal change, racial discrimination in the criminal justice system has been the main focus. QRE and the AFM Prison Reform group co-sponsored a half-day introductory workshop on the Alternatives to Violence Project, which has been used successfully with prisoners and youth. Members of QRE also participated in the New Jim Crow Action Group. Our action goals are to end mass incarceration, racial bias in the justice system, and barriers to reintegrating into the community. We feel renewed by joining with others in striving to make racial equality a reality in our personal lives, faith community, and society.

On a larger scale, at the behest of Green Friends the Meeting approved signing on to the Kabarak Call for Peace and Eco-justice that emerged from the Sixth World Conference of Friends in Kenya. Green Friends continued significant involvement with like-minded community groups focused on urgent climate change issues. Four Friends went to Washington, DC to be part of the National Climate Rally protesting the XL Pipeline. A number of Green Friends worked monthly with Citizens Climate Lobby pressing for strong measures to promote clean energy rapidly with legislation enacting a revenue neutral carbon tax on fossil fuels. This strong concern has been shared with AFM Friends over several years.

A quest for spreading work among us has brought heartening results with new young activists joining the Committee. Though Green Friends wishes it could reach out to more Friends and others with Earthcare concerns, the feeling of the group continues positive and strong.

AFM continued to be challenged with finding sufficient Friends who felt led to serve in the many roles we have created to meet the needs of the Meeting. The Nominating Committee stayed busy throughout 2013. Its work also included writing or revising position descriptions where changes in roles and responsibilities had occurred.

An ad hoc committee brought to Social Concerns the Israeli-Palestine Minute from SAYMA (presented by Swannanoa Monthly Meeting) calling for the boycotting of goods produced by Israeli corporations on Palestinian lands. The ad hoc committee presented the Minute at a Meeting for Worship for Business, which asked for more deliberation by the whole community. The ad hoc committee worked to thoroughly consider and clarify the Minute and then approved it in committee. When the Minute was discussed

again at an open forum, it was clear that there was not unity on the Minute. When this was reported back to the Meeting, an invitation was made for someone who felt led to facilitate further discussion and search for a way forward.

In October a group of nine SAYMA Ministry and Nurture Committee members met for a weekend at AFM. Hosts were found so that each had a bed for one or two nights. On Saturday, refreshments and lunch were provided by the Hospitality Committee. Some of the hosts joined the group for dinner at a nearby restaurant. The SAYMA Committee minuted its appreciation for being warmly welcomed and well cared for. We were also enriched as we hosted Rachel Bewley-Bateman, the FWCC clerk for the Europe and Middle East Section.

The Administration Committee focused on developing solutions to a more complex organization and addressing situations brought on by the larger number of attenders and the increased use of our physical space. We are increasingly a resource to our neighborhood and rent our space to a variety of organizations and educational programs. We are dedicated to equality and the nonjudgmental use of our space. In part, the expanded use has led to increased complexity in our finances, which in turn led to the decision to hire a part-time bookkeeper.

The Administration Committee is dealing with the maturity of the physical plant and grounds. The positive side of growth is that we have more resources to distribute, as we discern our stewardship of the existing physical plant. We remain mindful that the day-to-day maintenance of our space is also a spiritual journey. We need to be prepared to move promptly to care for our building, our renters' spaces and our own spaces, so that the spiritual and practical needs of all meetinghouse users can be met in an efficient and respectful manner.

The Ferguson Cabin Committee finished building the new Cabin with the hard work and financial support of many Friends. To this end the Committee conducted several successful fundraisers. After much deliberation, the addition was christened "Irene" in honor of Irene Ferguson. Once declared complete, an open house was held to introduce "Irene" to the Meeting. The new cabin was well received, and now having the relative luxury of an in-house half bathroom in addition to a full bathroom (with hot shower!) located in the ground floor and accessible from outside, the facility was rented by 77 people (individuals and groups) throughout the year. In addition, the other structures, land, and dock were maintained and improved through Friends' efforts and still more financial support.

The Atlanta Friends Meeting is blessed by the abundant gifts of its many members and attenders. These gifts give vibrancy to our Religious Education programs for children and adults, to the work of our various committees that attend to the life of the Meeting and meetinghouse, and to our work in the larger community. We are further blessed that AFM staff are skillful and dedicated in caring for their particular responsibilities, which helps the Meeting operate more effectively and lightens the load for many volunteers.

Even so, Friends continue to feel that they are stretched too thin, and as a result, there are insufficient members to fill many vacant committee positions. Additionally there are insufficient numbers of volunteers to help with weekly tasks, religious education, and hospitality. The Meeting may need to thoughtfully consider the long-term

sustainability of the many obligations that have been undertaken. There is a sense that because there is so much going on simultaneously that our busyness reduces our spiritual center and reduces our genuine connections, particularly with newcomers.

We aspire to be a welcoming spiritual home for all and there is a deep desire to faithfully discern a spirit-led path toward making this an ever increasing reality.