

State of Society Reports

2021 Annual Sessions of Illinois Yearly Meeting

Bloomington-Normal

The COVID-19 pandemic over the past calendar year has brought Bloomington-Normal Friends Meeting both great difficulty and some surprise advantages. We have had to adjust, and adjust we have. Since March 2020, we have met weekly on Zoom. Members have met from their own homes. This has resulted in both negative and positive outcomes.

On the down side, we miss the physical presence of other Quakers and the informal interactions that occur before and after meeting. We have had to learn new technology and norms to make meeting happen. The comfort and ability to do that varies among members. Meeting on Zoom can be awkward and cumbersome in some ways—fumbling with the mute/unmute and a very different overall feel in our worship. For some, the discomfort with Zoom has prevented attendance altogether.

Our women's group, Meeting for Eating, has not met and has been sorely missed. The one exception was when Beth Schobernd Carpenter hosted an outdoor gathering for Barbara Burke who was moving to North Carolina. Everyone brought their own food, and seats were in a circle at least six feet apart.

One unexpected positive thing that has happened is that Quakers from meetings in other parts of the country have been able to join us. For example we were visited via Zoom by the new ILYM Field Secretary Brad Laird. Steve Tamari from St.Louis joined us several times. In addition, Barbara Burke, who left Illinois last summer to move to North Carolina, has been able to continue meeting with us. Weekly attendance has been higher than in-person, possibly because of the convenience being able to meet without having to leave home.

Children have joined us several times. Although we have not managed First Day School or connected with other meetings who offered help, there has been some meaningful intergenerational contact. We held some family events on Zoom that have included children. We had our usual August picnic where we all ate simultaneously with word games to follow. Later in the year, Fariba Murray led a lively on-line Bingo game that lasted well past our youngest participant's bedtime. At Christmastime, we had a Christmas music "talent show" where several members showed off their musical skills. Fun was had by all... but we discovered that singing along unmuted does not really work.

Chris Jocius of the Urbana Meeting generously donated his Quaker library and a bookcase to our meeting. As soon as we can meet in person, they will be stored at Normandy Village. We look forward to using them for enhancing spiritual quests and learning more about Quaker history. We are grateful for this gift and recognize the generosity and spiritual depth of the original owner.

Our times bring much concern about racial justice. Over the summer, many of us ventured out to attend rallies and protests in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. During the fall and winter months, our members reflected deeply on the topic of racism and racial justice through on-line discussions of two books: *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo and *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram Kendi. The discussion sessions were led by Heather Evert, Leader of Adult Education. Through these books, and thanks to Heather's guidance, we worked together to take an honest look at our own racial biases and how we can shift our thinking to move from racism to anti-racism.

For a second year in a row, B-N Friends Meeting wanted to focus on the needs of a family in need at Christmas time. We raised over \$600 dollars for a family we have become aware of. Since shopping was difficult during the pandemic, we gave \$300 in cash to the family and bought clothing gift cards for the children. Because of ongoing hardship experienced by this family, some members have continued to assist this family.

Overall, we have gained strength and comfort from each other during this time of stress. Together, we adjusted to a new way of life in isolation. And in isolation, we have felt the loving presence of Friends from within our meeting and beyond.

Burlington Worship Group

The Burlington Worship Group is alive and well despite the challenges of COVID-19. From April 2020, we have met via the miracle of Zoom which allowed us to participate even when we were not at home. However, because of internet problems, two of our members decided to opt out of worship until we could meet in person again, which we hope will be very soon.

Clear Creek Monthly Meeting

When Clear Creek met for meeting for worship with a concern for business on the third Sunday in March 2020, where we approved our last State of Society report, little did we know it would be over a year before many of us saw each other again. Our small but tightly knit community has suffered during this time, but persevered and in ways gotten stronger.

From mid-March until May, we did not meet. Given hardware limitations of many members, we could not meet via Zoom. Some of us participated in Zoom worship with other meetings, but most of us had no worship option. In May, we took advantage of the spacious meetinghouse and began holding in person worship there. While Putnam County at that point had very few cases of the virus, the surrounding counties fared much worse and those living elsewhere remained at home rather than risk carrying the virus to others. Our wonderful weekly potlucks morphed into brown bag lunches during which we were able to have our valued fellowship time. We found that with fewer people to share Dick Ashdown's ever-present contribution of Pringles, we gained weight. When the weather began to cool, we moved worship to Clear Creek House where social distancing is more difficult but we wore masks and sat as far apart as we are able.

We have attempted to have business meeting via Zoom, sometimes with more success than others. With only one computer for the five or six people on site, there have been issues with the remote attenders not being able to hear the discussion. The months we have been able to meet via Zoom, we are glad to see the faces of our otherwise absent members and we may continue to use Zoom for business meeting post-pandemic, thus allowing our snowbirds to attend in the winter months.

In October we were blessed with the arrival of the ILYM caretaker, Judy Reese, her dog Shakespeare, and her cat Angelou, who now reside in Clear Creek House. She has quickly become an integral part of our meeting, although given the pandemic restrictions is having difficulty getting as acquainted in the wider community as she had hoped. Her only real interaction is with Clear Creek Friends on Sundays.

The past year has been hard for the spiritual well-being of the meeting. With fewer people present, there has been less vocal ministry. Those who have not been able to be present, feel disconnected from Clear Creek and miss their meeting family. We have missed those celebrations and occasions which normally bring more people to the grounds—our annual Easter lunch, Women's Weekend, Yearly Meeting Annual Sessions, our fall Homecoming—and look forward to a time when we will be able to have others with us on the grounds.

On the positive side, those of us who have been able to gather together since May feel like we have gotten to know each other better, as we still enjoy fellowship before and after worship. We are grateful for the technology that allows us to see the faces of those who are typically regular attenders as well as not-so-regular attenders who are able to join us from afar.

In spite of the pandemic, we have continued our Clear Creek ministry of picking up sticks on the grounds after every storm, as well as our attempts to convert the local raccoon to a less destructive lifestyle. Most of us have now had our vaccinations so we hope that once we are all vaccinated and can move back to the more spacious meetinghouse, we can feel more comfortable meeting together in person.

Columbia Friends Meeting

2020 has been a momentous year, with challenges and joys that we never could have expected. Between January and March, we were meeting in a temporary space we rented at Rockbridge Christian Church, as we had sold our meetinghouse on Locust Grove Road in order to finance the building of our new meetinghouse across from Russell Elementary School. In March, we moved our meetings to Zoom due to COVID-19, and they remained virtual for the duration of the year. The lives of many people in meeting have been directly touched by the pandemic through the loss of loved ones. It has been hard to be physically separated from each other, but this new format has allowed several friends from Washington, Ohio, and farther-flung areas in Missouri to join us. About 15 people join each First Day, and we also have midweek meetings on Wednesdays.

First Day School was lively in the first few months of the year, as Mae and Louis Franzel and Magdalene and William Saunders explored the new space at Rockbridge Christian Church. Since we moved to Zoom, the children's role in the meeting has changed, as they are able to be present (on mute) with their parents during meeting. Ronnie Bradley and her children Penny and Allie also began attending meeting regularly, and we look forward to welcoming them in person someday. Seeing the patchwork quilt of faces, having the children present throughout the meeting, and hearing from everyone at the rise of meeting leads us to a wider and more equal sharing. This format gives us a chance to hear one another more clearly and to listen more deeply to each person's spiritual struggles and journeys.

Several beloved members of our meeting died in 2020: Ichiro Matsuda, Judy Richards, and Sylvia Spotts. Both Ichiro and Sylvia had been living in local rest homes but occasionally attended meetings. Judy Richards, who had been our recording clerk for many years, had been living at home and suffered from a chronic illness. It has been difficult not to be able to gather to celebrate their lives, but we did hold a virtual memorial for Ichiro and Judy, and plan to do so for Sylvia as well, in coordination with her family. Friends joined from as far away as Kenya, and we were grateful for the technologies that allowed us to unite as a spiritual community.

Our meeting has been moved this year by the ongoing reality of racial injustice and police brutality. We began a masked and socially distant monthly "Black Lives Matter" vigil on our new property, which is located on a busier road. We also found creative ways this year to continue our annual support of the Crop Walk and the First Day School's project of raising money for Heifer International.

Our plans for our new meetinghouse have progressed. We have chosen a building plan, and our own Adrienne Stolwyk is serving as architect. We had considered a larger building with an apartment for a refugee family or family in need, but we decided in favor of a smaller building, with the possibility of building a small residence on our property in the future. It is our intention to make the construction as sustainable as possible, so we are choosing materials carefully.

Planning our meetinghouse, along with maintaining our connections via technology, has reinvigorated our relationships. We are hopeful for the meeting's growth and readiness to meet the challenges of the future, whether personal, community-wide, or beyond.

Downers Grove Friends Meeting

In March of 2020, we began virtual Meeting for Worship. We overcame the logistics of online worship and business meeting, but many of us are still challenged by the format. Among the challenges has been the loss of Friends who previously met in worship but are not participating in Zoom. Worship and Ministry has reached out to those Friends to let them know they are missed. Even with these challenges, we have seen blessings come from this change, such as reconnecting with far-away Friends.

Earlier in 2020, we still had our usual in-person community-building and religious education activities, including our groups that met for sewing, Quaker discussion topics, and aging discussion. Once we moved to virtual meetings, we still held an outdoor MFW and gardened while the weather cooperated. Even now, we have Friends who go to the meetinghouse to maintain it, the plants inside, and our landscape. Besides the virtual change-over for our usual activities, we added several new ones: worship sharing, meeting for healing, several holiday gatherings, movies, and a talk by a former young Friend of our meeting, Milton Dixon, on permaculture gardening. Two Friends attended a workshop based on WYM's annual Session address by Colin Saxon; they are now prepared to conduct a workshop on this topic with anyone in the meeting who would like to attend.

We had several important events this year, including our 60th anniversary as a meeting. We welcomed Mark Masi as a member (Dec 13) and will have a cake and in-person fellowship when it is safe to do so. We also celebrated the life of long-time member, Barbara Matt, who passed away in May at age 93 in Bettendorf, Iowa, after a long illness. We wished dear Friend Laurie Rippe happiness as she moved to North Carolina to be near family and appreciate the wall hanging she gave to the meeting.

This year made evident the inequities in our country and the world. We are hopeful that it ignited a movement to address these to make 2021 a year of change that will bring more light and peace to the world.

Duneland Friends Meeting

The year 2020 has been one of challenges and opportunities in large part due to the COVID-19 pandemic that required us to be physically distant and for many to isolate ourselves in our homes. While we were unable to meet together physically in our meeting place for most of the year, technology allowed us to meet virtually. During 2020 we met more frequently than before, and our membership and attendance increased.

In March, after in-person meeting ended due to the pandemic, we started meeting by Zoom and, our First Day worship became a joint effort with South Bend Friends Meeting. For a time, we jointly met every First Day. By midsummer Duneland returned to meeting separately on second and fourth First Days. When we met in person, we so enjoyed singing hymns. After a few virtual meetings we decided to try to sing again. Noel and Sarah mailed hymnals to all attenders. The synchrony of the singing is a little off but we love singing together so much and the words are so meaningful that we think it is worth it.

In addition, we began to meet most every Wednesday evening for worship on Zoom. The Wednesday evening worship developed into a time of sharing our personal lives, joys, laughter, and concerns, that ultimately led to bringing us closer and to a stronger spiritual unity. Some of us realized that it sustained us in our newly required isolation and helped us with our virtual contact in the outside world. Our love, concern, and support for each other grew stronger as many of us had family members experiencing illnesses and even surgeries and death. For this love, concern, and support we were grateful.

One example is Tom and Roxy Jacobs, who had moved to Florida several years ago, were able to join us on Zoom. What a blessing it was to have Roxy's wisdom as a long time Quaker, join our

worship. Also, we were happy to have Dan Dresner, a long time, faithful attender of Duneland's Bible Study, join us for a while at meeting for worship until his sudden passing on June 10.

In June, two new members, Maryalice Larson and Gary Crum, were heartily approved for membership with Duneland Friends. They had been attending for over a year while we had been meeting in person. This brings our group to a core of 13 members and regular attenders. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our regular Bible Study at Marlou Carlson's had to be suspended. Clerk Noel Pavlovic has maintained contact with her through her son so that she knows we are continuing to think of her and are "holding her in the Light."

We planned with South Bend Meeting our annual joint Friends retreat September 25-26, this year held virtually. The theme was "Spiritual Grounding for our Work in the World: Sharing our Stories." Dwight Wilson's keynote speech 'On Grounding' was inspiring and open to all ILYM Friends to attend. On Saturday we began the retreat sharing pancakes virtually, followed by five minutes of Chi Gong to attune to our bodies and 15 minutes of silent worship. Later, one new (Maryalice Larson) and one seasoned Friend shared their spiritual journeys followed by a worship sharing breakout where we shared our stories. The retreat ended with yoga and silent worship.

We continue to hold in our hearts the intersecting concerns of climate change, societal racism, and economic disparity. We have donated carbon tax funds to help a charity that builds carts for people in third world countries that are unable to walk. These carts are run by hand rather than electricity or gas so they contribute to reducing carbon emissions. We have also contributed to a local pet pantry.

With the many disturbing events in 2019 and 2020, involving the deaths of our brothers and sisters of color, Duneland Friends joined with Quakers in a national conversation. We have made a commitment to become more educated about our own internal feelings and to seek understanding of the issue by reading books and articles as well as holding waiting worship for guidance. Further, once a month our designated educational forum has focused on the queries published in an Epistle of 2020 from a Pre-Gathering Retreat of Friends of Color and their Families at the Friends General Conference. Maryalice has been attending ILYM's Anti-Racism committee meetings. She has been facilitating input from our meeting to the committee and sharing information and resources from the committee to our meeting.

With the future of how COVID-19 will affect our ability to meet in question, we plan to continue as we are. We look forward to the time we can meet in person again, but we are thankful for the serendipitous blessings we have received while we have been unable to meet as before.

Evanston Monthly Meeting of Friends

Evanston Friends Meeting spent this year of pandemic and upheaval growing together, "helping each other up with a tender hand." We are grateful to have remained a seeking, growing spiritual community.

We have held meeting for worship every First Day, via Zoom. After close of meeting, we now practice a round-robin check in, when worshipers introduce themselves and give current news of their households. This practice keeps the congregation in closer touch with each other. During the warmer months, we also held First Day afternoon meetings for worship in the meetinghouse side yard, in a socially distanced circle. This in-person gathering brought out some who did not participate in worship via Zoom. Wednesday morning virtual worship sharing sessions provided opportunities to respond to thoughtful queries. Mid-week meeting for worship at The Admiral at the Lake, a Kendal retirement community in Chicago, also continued via Zoom.

Virtual meetings have brought together hearts ready for worship, and given us the opportunity to see each other's faces; the ability to keep company with friends from far away; and the joy of

welcoming new seekers and new members to our community. Truly, the Spirit has been “unmuted” among us: vocal ministry has been profound.

Our children’s sense of the life of the Spirit has been nurtured by First Day classes, though attendance at virtual classes has been lower than prior to the pandemic. Periodically, young Friends have joined in the round-robin greetings, so we have been able to admire their growth and development. EFM members and attenders have continued to learn together in book study groups, in small spiritual direction groups, in lively inquirers groups, and in frequent Meeting for Learning Zoom gatherings, including notable presentations by a Quaker writer, a Muslim scholar and chaplain, and a Jewish rabbi. We have carried a deep concern for one another as the pandemic and the trials of illness or aging have affected members and attenders and their families. What can we do? How can we help when we can’t visit each other in person? The round-robin sharing after meeting for worship has allowed Friends to communicate challenges being encountered, but we still carry concerns about the difficulties we may not hear about, or cannot address. Concerns included helping families trying to balance their youngsters’ education with the demands of working or the economic impact of unemployment; and addressing the needs of older members recovering from physical injuries. We also worried about friends who have become more isolated, more lonely, and less able to handle life’s challenges.

Meeting committees met by Zoom, in order to safely sustain the spiritual and operational needs of Evanston Meeting. Clearness committees for membership and for personal issues were undertaken with care and tenderness. Evanston Meeting welcomed four new members, and accepted the membership transfer of an EFM member.

Recently, members and attenders were invited to recall favorite memories of a life together as a spiritual community. A rich time of shared stories followed, including accounts of times when the Spirit was present among us in powerful testimonies, in stirrings of the air, in vibrant silence. Many remembered weighty Friends who once sat among us, and now sit only in our memories. We also remembered picnics in the yard, potlucks downstairs, hymn singing before silent worship, shared laughter over coffee. We look forward to a day when all these ways of being a community can return.

Fox Valley Quaker Meeting

In recent years our small Monthly Meeting has held meeting for worship in the Howenstine home at Pioneer Farm, McHenry County. With the increasing presence of the COVID virus, and in order to reduce possible exposure to the virus for Friends in close proximity to one another, we stopped holding meetings in early March 2020. Additionally we canceled plans for our traditional “Old-Fashioned Corn Roast and Pot-Luck Picnic”.

However, with the advent of warmer summer weather we decided that we could still hold outdoor meetings for worship at the farm. We chose a location under some tall black walnut trees, with space for participants to sit far enough apart on folding chairs, while looking down a slight slope toward a rich variety of beautiful vegetation. (Pioneer Farm people now refer to this inspiring location as “Quaker Slope”.) On rainy days or when it became too cold in late autumn, we moved our Meetings for Worship into a building that is used as a Warming House at the farm for activities held in cold weather. With two wood-burning stoves and enough space for Friends to sit at a safe distance from one another, the Warming House got us through the winter. With the advent of spring we were able to meet outdoors again.

Throughout the challenges of COVID, the weather, and location, our meeting has maintained a constant small size, with participation being 10 or fewer. Successfully meeting these challenges has demonstrated that the “state of our meeting” is still vigorous, with deeply appreciated spiritual depth and

fellowship. We look forward to the possibilities of having more participants (including children) and more contact with other Friends of Illinois Yearly Meeting.

Northside Friends Meeting

Throughout a year of global grief and despair, Northside Friends Meeting channeled our sorrow into innovation, grounded in community and fueled by hard work. We held our first virtual Meeting for Worship on March 22, 2020. Threshing sessions guided the newly-formed Technology Committee, bringing our community into virtual life on Zoom. Friends were surprised at the results: “I would have said video worship was impossible; miraculously, I was wrong”; “I was shocked at how effective Meeting for Business is on Zoom.” Although the transition may have appeared seamless, it happened only through solid community support for individual Friends’ dedication and hard work. The pandemic threatened to rob us of our community’s bounty, but NFM insisted “We WILL be fed.” Providing service to the meeting has been a lifeline for many Friends.

Our success is also based on the privilege of access to computers and internet. We have hosted visitors from France, Germany, Switzerland, the Philippines, New Zealand, and across the US, but we have also failed Friends without computers or for whom virtual worship does not feed the Spirit. We grieve the unknowable number we have lost.

Our bitterest loss is families with children, especially as we fear these families may not return after lockdown. We also mourn the absence of our Healing Circle, whose hands-on healing modalities do not translate into virtual format.

Blessedly, we did not lose any Northside Friends directly to COVID. We created a Fund for Sufferings to support Friends in financial hardship but received no requests. We recognize, again, this reflects our privilege in comparison to many of our neighbors.

We have sought spiritual direction for our sorrow. In May, NFM hosted a Meeting for Mourning for the global devastation of the pandemic. In October, we convened a Meeting for Lamentation, “holding up to the Divine our cries of anguish and misfortune.” In December, Friends gathered for a Memorial Meeting for our beloved member Glenn Neumann, who had moved to Colorado in 2019; Zoom allowed Glenn’s far-flung family and friends to participate.

Although we miss post-meeting social hour, many find Joys and Sorrows more intimate online: “I share things I might never say during in-person Meeting.” Friends like seeing others’ lives in the background—sometimes it seems there are as many cats onscreen as people.

We are led to deep and sometimes painful discernment around ways we harm one another. White Friends are learning to recognize systemic white supremacy, and cisgender people their internalized transphobia. We approved minutes on misgendering, and a NFM Mission Statement authored by our Committee for Ministry on Racism. Both actions reflect the community’s continuing growth and enrichment. “It’s a gift to see our rough spots and still love each other.”

This year’s Nominating Committee tapped into the global paradigm shift and, using the Strawberry Creek MM (Pacific YM) nominating practices, revised our committees as containers for Friends’ ministries. The transition has not always been easy, and it may take years to fully appreciate the changes.

We have maintained involvement in social issues. Since 2019 we have opened Meetings for Business by reading Crossroads’ Values of a Transforming Institution—provoking a subtle but real effect on the community. The Japanese American Service Committee (our brick-and-mortar hosts) connected us with Tsuru for Solidarity, protesting immigrant detention. In September, NFM hosted an online event to fold origami tsuru (cranes) for a 2021 protest in Washington. In November, we moved our building

fund to a low-interest time deposit at Seaway/Self-Help Federal Credit Union, supporting economic growth and stability on Chicago's South and West sides.

We recognize our prodigious blessings. At an online Thanksgiving Gratitude Party we wrote messages like "My human and animal family," "To those who do the work," and "Small moments of connection" on wooden leaves, which were affixed to a quilted Gratitude Tree. We are particularly grateful for our newest member Arcenia Harmon.

The challenges of 2020 have drawn us closer spiritually, with Spirit moving closer to us. We can't know what will happen as lockdown lifts—"it's joyful but complex." We remain strong, engaged, and even more loving, and are confident if we follow Spirit, way will open.

Oak Park Friends Meeting

Events outside the meeting's control have continued to have deep impacts this past year. The COVID-19 pandemic meant the Oak Park Friends Meeting has met on Zoom all year. We continue to be grateful for those willing to host. We have become a close virtual group, sharing in the joys and concerns of our lives.

We have 6-7 members who decline to meet on Zoom. We have missed them, but have tried to continue to stay in touch with them and make sure they are doing all right. This has happened through the Ministry and Care Committee as well as individual members who have gone out of their way to be supportive, especially to some of our older members. We are sorry to report that one of those members, Burke Shipley, our oldest member, both in age and longevity, passed on this year. We have also had a number of visitors, some who have come and gone and others who have stayed. We joyfully welcome new attenders.

We have maintained spiritual practices. We have mid-week worship monthly. Once a month we have a written reflection which is shared in the weekly announcements, disseminated faithfully by one of our members this year. Twice we have held worship sharing sessions around those written reflections. The Peace, Justice and Environment Committee sponsored two worship sharing sessions focused on racism and an adult RE given by Hayley Hathaway of Quaker Earth Care.

In the preelection environment, we wrote many postcards encouraging citizens to vote. We have greatly increased our regular donations to various charitable organizations, especially those focused on racial justice, as seasoned by the Peace, Justice and Environment Committee. Several of our members attended one or the other of the anti-racism workshops presented by ILYM. We created a Minute on George Floyd and racial injustice, which we posted on our website. We honored our commitment to Housing Forward, our local homeless organization in providing food on two Fridays. We have a liaison to both FCNL and AFSC. We have begun writing postcards around the topics suggested by FCNL.

Lastly, after years of searching, we found a lovely site where we can have Meeting for Worship on Sundays, sharing the space with a music education organization.

We will continue as a small, lively meeting that nourishes creative ministries and one another. We look forward to the future and to returning to a more normal way of functioning in the coming year.

Saint Louis Monthly Meeting

Saint Louis Monthly Meeting is using technology to keep our meeting together in 2020. Though we grieve the loss of connection to Spirit we feel with gathering in person, we have been using technology to continue the types of activities that are meaningful to us like Sale for Service, The Retreat, Zoom coffee hour and adult education gatherings after worship, Talent and Sharing nights, etc. Friends have pulled together so much which has helped strengthen and deepen our worship.

Many Friends are refreshed and sustained by the Midweek Meeting. Those attending report it is smaller and feels more intimate. We plan to continue having the Midweek Meeting even after we are able to safely return to our meetinghouse.

Ministry means what we offer to each other from our Spirit to another person's spirit. That might be the words that we speak in Meeting for Worship or it might be the depth of our silence. Connecting with each other through cards, emails, phone calls and texts are nourishing our ministry. Many Friends feel that the teaching of the Bible to the older children has been a valuable ministry. We have story hour with our younger children before worship to stay connected. During the pandemic SLFM had three adults and three children joined as members.

Our meeting has always been open to a diversity of messages. We have used workshops and introductory messages by our clerk to help Friends understand what vocal ministry is. Because of these things, we believe Friends feel safe to speak as they are led.

Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting

Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting ceased in-person worship in March 2020 when Illinois first went into shutdown for COVID-19. Soon after, we began weekly online worship, but only a handful attended, and those attenders did so partly as an act of faith to help keep the meeting from collapsing during the pandemic. Several of us connected socially through the autumn (outside, masked and physically distanced). We continued monthly meetings with attention to business online, considered questions related to our meeting space, and released financial support for our local Warming Center for homeless individuals. We invited and accepted Logan Plummer into membership, who is now studying at Earlham remotely from Terre Haute, and supported his education from our Ministry Fund. A few of us struggled to assist Maurine Pyle as her health declined this winter, but we are all delighted she has found a safe and healing environment at a retirement community in Terre Haute.

In April 2021 we resumed in-person worship at the Dayemi Family Center, and recognized what a palpable energy we had been missing with online worship. For the time being, we have set up a "hybrid" meeting with the imaginative technical assistance of Dawn Crimson—a physical worship circle with a "Zoom station" allowing for remote participants to join us. While weekly attendance averaged 6-10 before the pandemic, we may see reduced participation going forward. In fact, four members of our community are in the process of relocating out of state: Maurine Pyle, Michael Batinski, Virginia Hoffman and Logan Plummer. These are major losses of eldership and embodiments of Spirit. With SIU having been in enrollment decline for two decades, more severely since 2015, we also have missed the periodic influx of young families who used to come to Carbondale for their degrees, or young academics starting their careers. On the other hand, we still enjoy having part-time attenders from the wider region, since the closest other Quaker meeting is 100 miles away in St. Louis. From the founding of Southern Illinois Friends in the late 1950's, the meeting size has cycled from just a handful, to the 20 range, and back again, across the decades. There are still at least five consistent participants who will be keeping our hearth warm in the coming year, and we look forward to recovering from the pandemic as the Way Opens.

Urbana-Champaign Friends Meeting

Urbana-Champaign Friends Meeting has faced major challenges this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we have not been able to hold Meeting for Worship in the meetinghouse for more than a year, we have found other ways to join together for worship and fellowship and to follow the leadings of the Spirit.

Since March 2020, our Meetings for Worship via Zoom have provided a reliable space for Friends to worship together and to feel a sense of connection. Friends have been able to join in worship without risking their health, including those who live in assisted living facilities and in other parts of the country. One Friend described the Zoom Meetings as a lifeline for her during the pandemic.

We have changed some of our usual practices during worship to accommodate the needs of Friends during this time when many have felt isolated. Silent worship is now thirty minutes instead of one hour. The period following worship, when we share announcements, joys, and concerns, is much longer than it was when we met in the meetinghouse. Our facilitator sets the tone with an unhurried pace, calling on one person at a time and inviting them to share as much or as little as they choose. Many Friends feel that they have grown closer to others in the meeting as a result of this extended sharing time.

Some Friends find that the thirty minutes given for silent worship does not provide enough time for them to center and attend to the Spirit Within. Spoken ministry seems to be less frequent. Others observe that the spirit of worship often continues into our sharing time when Friends reflect on their personal experiences and spiritual insights. At one meeting, a Friend spoke out of the silence to the query, "How do I practice patience?" Others continued to speak on this theme during the sharing of joys and concerns.

Clearly, the Zoom meetings do not meet the needs or desires of every Friend. Some are not comfortable with the technology, and others do not find the Zoom meetings conducive to worship. In the summer and fall of 2020, we provided the option of Meeting for Worship outdoors. Several Friends enjoyed sitting in silence among the lovely trees on the well-tended grounds of the meetinghouse and attending to the Spirit that is present in nature. We cherished seeing each other in person.

Our First Day School has met regularly each Sunday via Zoom. The virtual platform has presented new challenges for engaging our group of children, who range in age from four to thirteen. We are grateful that the group meets consistently and continues to explore our Quaker values.

During the pandemic, Friends have cared for one another in many ways. Several Friends organized our Wednesday Check-ins via Zoom, providing spiritual and emotional support during this time when many have felt isolated. Friends have assisted each other with their physical needs and lifted each other's spirits through phone calls and safe in-person encounters.

During the past year, Urbana-Champaign Friends Meeting has responded to the needs of others in our community, nation, and world, chiefly spurred on by our very active Peace and Service Committee. Following the violent arrest of a local Black woman and the death of George Floyd, we approved a statement on police violence, which we sent to the mayors, police chiefs, and city council members of the twin cities. The statement was also published in the News-Gazette. We collected funds and twenty-four boxes of books for Books to Prisoners, a local organization which mails donated books to people who are incarcerated in our local jail and state prisons. We undertook a very successful fundraiser to support local immigrants and low-income residents. This year we are additionally supporting two small agencies in Central America with close, long-standing ties to our meeting, and we held a talent show via Zoom. Inspired by Northside Friends Meeting, we wrote a letter to our local newspaper, inviting all to join us in mourning the world's losses due to the pandemic by lighting a candle and holding a moment of silence at sundown on Memorial Day 2020.