

## **2024 State of Society Reports Monthly Meetings of Illinois Yearly Meeting**

### **Burlington Worship Group**

The Burlington Worship Group is seeking to reconnect with previous participants that stepped aside throughout the pandemic. With the guidance of Field Secretary Mark McGinnis, we are starting a several sessions Zoom meeting, "Exploring Quakerism."

We hope to build our sense of this faith experience, Quakerism. We, also, seek to strengthen our relationships with each other in this process.

### **Clear Creek Monthly Meeting**

Clear Creek continues to be a loving and deeply spiritual community. While our worship is largely silent, there is a strong sense of connectedness with each other and the Divine. Our numbers are small, particularly during the winter months, so we are always happy when Friends visit.

We mark the beginning of our year with our annual Easter celebration. That includes worship, a potluck lunch, and an egg hunt for children. We are glad to see extended families of our regular attenders and other Friends and friends we do not see often.

Spring saw the return of our snowbirds and yearly meeting activities, starting with workday in May. The work done this day helped clean up the grounds after the winter and to begin work on preparing the campus for Annual Sessions. Much of the work needed this past year had to do with tree damage sustained in various storms. One of our contributions to the effort of preparing for Annual Sessions was to wash or replace all the curtains in Clear Creek House.

In June, we welcomed back Friends from throughout the yearly meeting and enjoyed catching up with them as well as seeing and hearing children swarm across the grounds. It gets pretty quiet once they all leave. We are excited to see the planning going forward to celebrate the 150th anniversary of ILYM in 2025.

This year we continued our support of our affiliated students by providing scholarships for their college and training school educations. We are grateful to have a memorial fund designated for this purpose.

We were glad to host a Writer's Retreat in August. This experiment was led by the Property Use ad hoc committee of ILYM. It was wonderful to see the grounds being used beyond Annual Sessions and hope to see more such retreats when all the logistics are settled.

When former caretaker Judy Reese left, she was unable to take with her a number of her possessions. When our cleaning lady had a yard sale in August, she offered to sell those items for Judy which pleased Judy exceedingly.

The October workday brought more Friends to campus and more work was accomplished. At the recommendation of a tree expert, the two large maples east of Clear Creek House were removed later in the Fall. While we miss the trees, we understand that their removal was necessary and look forward to seeing what Environmental Concerns selects to replace them.

During the winter our long-serving treasurer, Kay Drake, decided to step down. We are grateful for her many years of faithful service. Mike Murphy will assume those duties when Kay returns from Arizona in April.

We look forward to the spring and the return of activities to the campus.

## **Downers Grove Friends Meeting**

With the transition from “red flag” mandatory mask wearing to “green flag” no mask wearing required, the smiles at Downers Grove Friends Meeting were finally visible. Now we are working to rebuild and strengthen community within our meeting. We continue with options for how we hold Meeting for Worship: two Sundays that do not include technology during which some Friends also meet online for a virtual-only meeting, and two Sundays are a hybrid meeting which includes both remote and in-person worship. Yet it is with sadness that all Friends still do not worship together; some unable to worship in the presence of a computer and others wanting to support those who can only meet online. We are holding each other in the Light to find a way for everyone to worship together.

An unexpected benefit of the pandemic was an increase in the numbers of Friends attending Meeting for Worship with Concern for Business when it moved to our Virtual Meetinghouse on Zoom. However, some Friends find this platform less spiritual and communal as our former in-person meeting. We are exploring a hybrid format to accommodate our needs so that we will continue to build connections with each other.

We nurtured our spiritual life and community with several activities in the past year. In November, we held an on-site retreat led by Marcia Nelson. The topic of “Mysticism” brought together thirteen people, who became so involved in the discussion with each other that not all topics could be covered, and are anticipating another session. We are gratified that we are regularly offering Q101, and that new attenders are also eager to delve into Q102.

We build fellowship by coming together in common activities. In addition to our Aging and Saging, Friday Sewing, and Online Fellowship groups, we resumed fourth Sunday potlucks last April. We enjoyed time with each other so much during a spring landscape workday that we decided to call our summer landscape workday a “Fellowship Retreat” and after working, we ate together and enjoyed conversation. We hold an in-person Meeting for Worship on Thursday evening, and Worship Sharing once a month. Quaker 101/102, potluck and the other activities are good ways to introduce new people to the Quaker community. Also, spouses and significant others who do not attend worship feel comfortable participating.

We had many transitions this year that have affected our community. We mourned the loss of Friend Jack Ostergaard as well as attender Robert L. Eisen. Many of us also mourned for Chris Jocius, a beloved former member of our meeting. We said a bittersweet goodbye to members Pam and Bruce Wolfe who moved to Urbana this year, leaving many holes to be filled by others. With joy we celebrated four new members this year: the transfer of Cathy Smith from York (PA) Meeting, Judy Wolicki from 57th Street Meeting, and new members Alix Gomez and Rachel Bauer.

In addition to building connections within our meeting, the query from PYM, “How does our meeting communicate Friends' presence and principles to the wider community?”, reminds us of the importance of building connections outside of our meeting.

As a result of the ILYM-sponsored presentation by Paula Palmer, DGFM joined the Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. A new transfer member found that we are open to various viewpoints, such as abortion. Before DGFM, the Friend had never heard of a dual meeting—a connection to both Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting. Being invited by DGFM members to lunch with FUM’s Western Yearly Meeting General Superintendent Shawn McConaughy

and his wife Katrina led to hearing different viewpoints. We are connecting with the United Society of Friends Women and hope to publicize their Reading List books.

The war in the Mideast sits heavy with us. We minuted our support of a cease-fire between Palestine and Israel, with two Friends from our meeting and a Friend from Northside delivered a copy to our state senators' offices. Several of us also participate in the ILYM Meeting for Healing between Palestine and Israel, encouraging other Friends in ILYM to join us once a month, hosted in our Virtual Meetinghouse.

With the Light in our midst, we will continue to find ways to be present with each other and with the wider Quaker community.

## **Duneland Friends Meeting**

*This year's state of society from Duneland Friends Meeting was composed by asking Friends for individual reflections on the spiritual health of our meeting. This report is a result of the combining of and further discernment of the written gifts offered.*

In 2023, we continued to deepen our fellowship, love, and care for each other. We strive to keep a safe space for everybody to feel welcome, heard, included, and supported in their faith and life journeys. We have great diversity in our beliefs and religious traditions, and still, we feel at home with each other. We are aware of how rare and precious that is and are deeply grateful to God that has brought us together. We are one when sharing our joys and sorrows and despite the relatively high average age of our meeting, we remain young in our spirits, our desire to learn, and our commitment to justice and environmental causes as prerequisites for peace.

Growth and change can be an indicator of health. Our meeting grew in numbers by adding a member in 2023; but we also grew in depth and strength when we started regular Wednesday evening adult education sessions. Our meeting places high value on including adult education as part of our weekly Wednesday evening Zoom connection. This year we decided to learn more about the past lives and influence of historical Quakers. Members volunteered to select an individual and lead the discussion. Friends agree that we have each grown spiritually and as a group through this sharing.

We currently have no families with young children in the meeting, though we desire to. We have recently prepared for visitors with children by collecting books and materials that any one of us could use to let visiting children know they are welcome.

Singing hymns from *Worship in Song* has long been an important part of our worship at Duneland Friends. Our recent practice is to open our meetings for worship with Friends choosing hymns, often ones that speak to their conditions. Some hymns remind us of our Quaker forebears like George Fox and Lucretia Mott. Whether or not the words of a particular hymn reflect the language we would choose to use, we raise our voices together. We understand that we all have different paths and accept the diversity of one another's spiritual journeys. Joining together in song often leads us into a sense of coming together in a powerful spiritual dynamic, harmonizing our hearts as we enter into worship.

We close meeting for worship at Duneland Friends by inviting those in attendance to share any "joys, prayers, or spiritual concerns" that they may have. Ours is a community where joys, prayers, and spiritual concerns are shared and offered into the space of Spirit. It is one way we care for one another through family births, deaths, illness and more—by hearing and responding to one another's joys and concerns.

We have remained engaged with the work of ILYM—with members serving on or participating in Illinois Yearly Meeting (ILYM) committees (Environmental Concerns, Ministry and Advancement, Racial Equity and Education) and annual sessions planning. Some of us participate in ILYM events such

as monthly ILYM worship, workshops, and special worship sessions. Some members are also active in Friends General Conference anti-racism work and in Quaker Earthcare Witness.

In summary, 2023 found Duneland Friends in good spiritual health—supporting one another, engaging with the wider Quaker world, learning together, and open to change and new ways forward.

## **Elkhart River Preparative Meeting**

*How is the life of the Spirit faring in our Meeting?*

Friends have experienced an openness with the worship group: a place to experience the Divine, to begin and develop a spiritual path through hearing the insights of others, a place of healing and religious or spiritual belonging. For a number of us, the worship group feels like home—a place that allows us to be part of a spiritual group. We are grateful for the breadth of ways that Spirit is allowed to be present, and that we do not have to compare ourselves to how others experience Spirit.

We feel the significance of being able to bring heavy or unresolved things here, such as addiction and depression. We are able to be together through difficult things. We feel movement from isolation to connection. Friends have also found alignment with one another through following leadings to serve the greater good in our communities.

One Friend recently spoke to our condition about the powerful experience of becoming present to ourselves and one another:

“I’m thankful to be on this ride, in this body/avatar. Whether high or low. Learning these lessons. Even the bad is still good because we can take that and transmute it. Turn it into medicine. The deeper I go within, the more I can see the oneness in all things. Yes, on the outside we look, think, and act differently, but on the inside we’re the same divine essence. And no matter how much we/they try to separate each other, we’re still one, and there’s nothing they can do about it. Everything that lives and breathes is a part of that same essence, good or bad.”

## **Evanstion Monthly Meeting of Friends**

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Our Meeting continues to rebound from the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. We had no marriages, births or deaths, but joyfully welcomed five new members to our community who have become a vital spiritual presence among us. We were saddened by the departure of longtime, faithful member Phyllis Reynolds who moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan to live nearby one of her daughters.

Over the months, Trustees had been discussing how to best utilize the vacant former caretaker’s apartment. A member felt led to suggest offering it to a refugee family. A representative from Faith Community Initiative spoke to us about the responsibilities involved and the financial commitment required to host a family for a year. After a period of discernment addressing our questions and concerns, the Meeting decided to invite a family to live in the upstairs apartment. We were so grateful to receive additional material and financial support from neighboring Lake Forest Meeting and from members of Northside Friends Meeting. Due to the time and energy of many involved with the preparatory efforts, we were able to warmly welcome a Venezuelan family of five, a couple with their 16, 11, and 8-year-old children to a shared meal and their newly furnished home.

We are also mindful of our international Quaker community and how our witness is realized through education. Through the Bolivian Quaker Education Fund, EFM has supported a university student for the past three years. He sent us a note expressing his gratitude to be able to complete his nursing degree. EFM agreed to again sponsor another student to pursue college education. The meeting

also contributes to Chicago Friends School (CFS), and individuals from EFM contribute to the Bayard Rustin Scholarship fund to assist traditionally underrepresented students to be able to attend CFS. We also continue to financially support several local and national organizations whose work in peace and social justice causes align with our Quaker values.

Our First Day School continues to grow, with 26 children registered. Their day starts with a 15-minute Meeting for Worship for children and families before classes begin. While childcare staff provide care of our infants and young children, the primary teachers use Godly Play and Faith and Play curricula. The Head of First Day School invites adults or a guest speaker to help the intermediate students learn about the world's religions and Quaker history, belief and practice. Every fifth Sunday, the children join the adults upstairs for the last 15 minutes of Meeting. This year, First Day School participated in collecting warm coats and gathering mittens during the holiday season to be distributed to a shelter. The summer months are spent outside in nature, gardening, running around and reading several of the *What is...* children's book series with difficult topics like God, death, and friendship, which they then discuss among themselves.

Our community has benefited from a recent change in committee structure. The former Ministry and Council Committee was divided into Ministry and Worship, which is concerned with the spiritual life of the meeting as a whole, while Pastoral Care focuses on individuals and individual needs. Ministry and Worship Committee arranged the annual Silent Retreat held at Portiuncula Center for Prayer in Frankfort, Illinois, which provided an opportunity to replenish our spiritual life in a beautiful, serene setting. The committee also arranged for a listening session and then later a threshing session, each facilitated by Marcia Nelson, ILYM's co-Field Secretary, to address EFM's masking policy. There was hope that with patience and spirit-led Quaker process a way forward would transpire, and that occurred at our April business meeting.

Pastoral Care has recently developed a Connecting Friend program, where several attenders have requested contact and have been meeting with a member of the committee. They also reach out to persons who are suffering and those with other individual needs to provide services or confidential spiritual support as needed.

With our aging population, there has been increased interest in issues facing older persons in our community, so a new support group has recently evolved. It meets monthly.

The Library Committee has been actively increasing the spiritual growth of our community with acquisitions of literature relevant to Quaker interests.

We continue to cherish our resumed customs of pancake breakfasts, potluck meals and hymn singing each month. Those events help bring together our entire community, including our young families, beyond worship and First Day School. A monthly newsletter keeps us informed with the minutes from Meeting for Business, the quarterly treasurer's report and announcements of pending events.

We are so grateful to a member of meeting who has diligently worked to improve the technical quality of our hybrid worship.

When many of us feel overwhelmed in these times of human suffering, we are grateful for our caring community, where meeting together nurtures our spiritual growth.

## **Fox Valley Quaker Meeting**

We are a small meeting with regular involvement of seven resident active members. We continue to meet at the Howenstine home at Pioneer Tree Farm in McHenry. Worship is sustaining to us, and we care deeply for one another. Contact is maintained with those who have moved away. We grieve the loss of Alice Howenstine from our physical presence but she remains in our hearts. Due to age and health concerns, we all mask when indoors. Our social action is individual rather than corporate (two volunteer

with McHenry Environmental Defenders recycling activities, one coordinates a township community garden, one works for ILYM as co-Field Secretary). Everyone pitches in for the Annual Corn Roast. Once we move outside to worship on the 'Quaker slope', we will post a sign along Pioneer Road to welcome newcomers.

## **Lake Forest Friends Meeting**

Lake Forest Friends Meeting has had a quiet year of settling in the Spirit after the upheaval of the pandemic. Our Meeting for Worship continues to be the center point of the meeting. We have a welcome depth in our silence. Messages, when they come, are heartfelt and from a variety of Friends. We are delighted to have some newcomers at the meeting and welcome their presence in our worship.

An important part of our meeting for worship is the last bit when the children and youth enter with a burst of energy. Jay Marshall once described a blessing as affirmation, courage, and hope. No matter what we have been struggling with during meeting, when the children enter, and during their reports after meeting, smiles break out. They are truly a blessing to our community.

Our hybrid system is working well and those on Zoom feel that they are in the room during meeting for worship and meeting for business. Most Friends choose to attend in person; though one icy morning that was reversed. Our committee meetings are generally on Zoom only. We are still trying to figure how to better include the Friends on Zoom in some of the activities after meeting. We are starting to realize what we had imagined when putting in the system, that we have other uses for a hybrid format. In the past year, we have had a forum with Rob Thompson, a performance/fund-raiser by Betsey Means Wills, and a discussion of a Bayard Rustin biopic linked with Pendle Hill.

Spirituality is present in many areas of the meeting life. The most popular opportunities are for fellowship such as singing together, potlucks, and game nights. We have a group for those who identify as men and one for those who identify as women. We continue to meet at midweek meeting for worship and Saturday night adult discussion on Zoom though with much smaller numbers than a few years ago. We have found ministry in working together to maintain the meetinghouse and trying to solve some water issues that come with owning a building. In these ways we are strengthening our home meeting community. We have more ideas for fellowship and scholarship, yet, sometimes it feels like long time to get something on the calendar.

The meeting continues to have strong involvement with Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC), Friends General Conference (FGC), and especially with Illinois Yearly Meeting. In addition to participating in programs, we also have Lake Forest Friends in leadership positions at the yearly meeting and FGC. Being a part of this larger community of Friends has enriched our meeting over many years.

We continue to financially support many Quaker organizations and a couple of other organizations that share our vision of a witness to the world. However, we used to have three witness committees. With fewer members and busy lives, we decided to combine these into one. For many years we provided dinner once-a-month for those people without permanent shelter but a change in direction in the PADS organization has eliminated the need for that service. We were able to come together as a meeting to write a statement concerning the issue of women's health including abortion as requested by Friends Committee on National Legislation.

It feels that we are gathering strength. We continue to feel gratitude of just being together with the pandemic fresh in our minds. We endeavor to be a loving and supportive community. The lull that we have been in is starting to lift. A new generation of leadership is rising. We are poised to hear new leadings from God.

## Northside Friends Meeting

2024 brings transformation to Northside Friends, relocating to a new worship space after 20+ years with the Japanese American Service Committee (JASC). This transition has been wrenching, both for the grief of losing our longtime and historically significant relationship with Chicago's Japanese American community, and from the intense discernment process that was necessary to find clearness on our new home. Just three weeks after coming to unity on a move to Chicago Friends School (CFS), we held our first Meeting for Worship in the new space on April 7.

Overall, this experience has reinforced our sense of Northside as a place where we can “do hard things together” with joy. Northside's strength as a community is based in the loving relationships that we have cultivated with each other, rather than in any given physical space; what is important is how the space facilitates our community. Our worship is deep and fulfilling; it is a joy to report that the concern for our Ministry of Worship Committee is not how to create a space for covered worship, but how to deepen and enrich it. Our Tech Committee continues to be our backbone, supporting both our worship and community life. Throughout all the variations of remote, in-person, and hybrid, Northside has been able to create a gathered and covered meeting as we discern how Spirit moves and how to increase accessibility.

New attenders experience Northside as exceptionally welcoming. As one Friend observed, “Spirit is love embodied in our care for each other; people sense that and want to be brought into it.” In the past year, we had the joy of taking a marriage under our care, and are in the midst of clearness with another couple; we were also brought a providential opportunity to host a baby welcoming for a couple whose family encompassed both Quaker and Japanese American members. We regularly provide care during worship for three families with small children.

Northside dedicates extended time after worship to introductions and check-ins for everyone present, which keeps us connected and gives newcomers points of contact and common ground. Northside continues to serve as an urban “gateway meeting” for new Friends, and we have seen recent arrivals stepping up to take active roles in the community. We are welcoming a generational shift in meeting leadership—our Clerk, Treasurer, and Clerk of Ministry of Worship Committee are Friends who were newcomers to Quakerism fewer than ten years ago, and who are all under the age of 40. We have dedicated time and effort to building our capacity around gender identity, sexual orientation, and race; based on our encounters with Friends from other meetings while hosting Continuing Committee sessions in Fall 2023, we urge others in ILYM to pursue greater understanding and sensitivity around these issues.

Much of our focus now is on an “inward vs. outward” perspective. Finding ourselves on solid ground internally, we experience a “spirit of energy and opportunity.” The move brings an opportunity to stand with CFS as two Quaker organizations in a challenging world, supporting the education of Chicago's children in Quaker testimonies. How can Northside be a supportive presence as a “meeting in residence” at Chicago Friends School? What will the school community teach us? How can we build a shared social ministry in the meeting as a whole? How can we bring Crossroads' Principles for a Transforming Community—which we read prior to each monthly Meeting for Business—into our partnerships?

One Friend shared the concept of “lagniappe” or “a little extra,” which they identified with the way in which Northside approaches its ministry and community, always willing to give and bring a little extra to share. Northside continues into the coming year carrying that spirit, welcoming and joyfully undertaking the work that is required to deepen and engage with community, and discerning the way forward as we enter a new year.

Milestones: Greg Gundlach membership transfer to Hanover (NH) Friends Meeting; Viv Woodland membership transfer to Putney (VT) Friends Meeting; Approval of clearness process for

marriage of Adrian Nelson and Erika Kerr; Marriage of Tim Swast and Johamary Peña under the care of the meeting

## **Oak Park Friends Meeting**

At a recent Meeting for Worship, a Friend posed this query: in times of difficulty, where do you turn for hope, persistence and joy?

The difficulties of the world press on us this year. The wars in Ukraine and Israel/Gaza with their cruelties and dangers of expansion to the rest of the world, as well as the political situation in our own country, leave us feeling helpless and sometimes at odds with family and friends.

We continue to meet weekly for worship, and to work together on other projects such as preparing food for Housing Forward, the local homeless shelter, and buying gifts for selected families for the Community Holiday Gift Basket.

Two of our members have become very involved with Care Children's Academy, a Friends school in Uganda, helping financially, trying to raise interest in it, creating a website, and acting as a sounding board for the principal of the school. Others in our meeting have helped as well, and the meeting has given a donation. Unfortunately, the school has recently had to close, hopefully temporarily, due to finances. The meeting is exploring other ways to be of assistance.

For the last two years, five members of our meeting have been gathering at each other's homes for "Quaker Share". They have a written reflection and discuss their lives and concerns. This has been a bonding experience, and a lesson in listening.

Another member is involved with FCNL and brings information to us regarding their activities. FCNL requested input from Friends on what should be their highest priorities in the next year. We worked together as a meeting to decide what priorities to submit to them.

Our meeting is small, and currently without children attending. As we age, we have engaged in pastoral care activities to help each other as needed. We have been pleased to welcome several visitors recently who participated in Meeting for Worship. We have recently created and printed a new brochure and were excited to finally hang our newly produced banner in the window of our meeting place, which is the Oak Park String Academy, a small music school. We remain grateful to have found a home here after looking for a new space for many years.

So we find ourselves hoping for resolution for current problems, persistent in the activities we have taken on, and experiencing the joy of being in community with each other under the guidance of the Spirit.

## **South Bend Friends Meeting**

South Bend Friends Meeting continues to navigate rebuilding a sense of community that was diminished during the pandemic. Many Friends expressed a sense of burnout and fatigue from navigating life during and coming out of the pandemic. While we did not formally minute a year of rest, it occurred naturally throughout this past year. This was evident in a couple of ways. We had a smaller number of Friends on committees, and meeting did not produce a Clerk of Meeting. Instead, Ministry and Counsel distributed those duties among its members for the year. As we move further into 2024, we have noticed a growing movement from a period of rest into engagement.

Peace and Social Concerns Committee hosted a worship sharing hour in which Friends could express grief from experiences during the pandemic and held the suffering of the world in the Light. One thing that rose from that sharing was a sense to continue to rebuild community within the monthly meeting.



Ministry and Counsel resumed sending Friendly Midweek Moments. This is a midweek email in which we offer short readings selected from various yearly meeting's volumes of *Faith and Practice* as well as other Quaker writings to provide Friends with a weekly opportunity for personal reflection and renewal in Quaker faith and worship. Ministry and Counsel also offered a second hour on Nonviolent Communication. Participants felt a deeper dive into this topic would be of great benefit for our community. Ministry and Counsel and Peace and Social Concerns will look at options for an expanded course on this topic.

After decades of spirit-led work, Finance and Long Range Planning brought forth bylaws and articles of incorporation for Meeting to consider. Friends approved this and are grateful to the many Friends over the years who have contributed to this process.

Community building was seen in a variety of activities that included fourth Sunday brown bag lunches, Friends meeting to do needlework and art projects together, Friends going to the South Bend symphony as a group, and Friends walking together at Fernwood Botanical Garden. Young Friends accompanied by parents led the way to watching a *Better Homes of South Bend* play. The latter is an illustration of the role of systemic racial injustice and the legacy of housing discrimination in South Bend, Indiana.

Our meeting has expressed a desire for a deeper relationship with our yearly meeting. This led us to agree to the request to host Spring Continuing Committee. It was a joy to host and meet with other Friends. We were heartened to learn that other monthly meetings share our concerns about the accessibility of the yearly meeting property and concerns that the costs (both time and money) of maintaining the property may be a barrier to ILYM offering other community building activities. We will work to continue to strengthen our relationship with ILYM.

We continue to meet in person and via Zoom, which allows those who cannot attend in person to engage in the life of meeting. All these endeavors continue to strengthen our community of South Bend Friends and deepen our worship together.

## **Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting**

When affirming the spiritual gifts given to and brought forth by Friends to the Quaker community, Maurine Pyle noted that there comes a time when the Elders' best contribution is to stay home and hold the meeting (or Creation as a whole) in deep prayer and love. They have a lifetime of practice centering in worship. Friends with spiritual leadings and energy can spring forth knowing they are grounded from this center. Our meeting has a long history of supporting our individual Friends' ministry and service projects. In recent years these have included fundraising for assisting a local Afghan refugee family, organizing a speaker series on Southern Illinois racial history, and arranging community presentations of the film *Gratitude Revealed*.

Yet this year we have been more focused on holding the center. We faithfully meet for weekly worship, and we hold our business sessions regularly; we share a potluck after worship each month; we have our traditional family potlucks at least quarterly; and we spend time with one another socially. We welcomed the ILYM Co-Field Secretaries (Marcia Nelson and Mark McGinnis) in March and were gratified when Marcia confirmed that the core of the meeting is community, and that Friends like to have fun together.

As we practice holding the spiritual center of the meeting, we have benefited from the attendance of several visitors this year, and we are warm and welcoming with them. Even with visitors and irregular attenders, our worship circle rarely exceeds ten participants and often numbers three or four. Nurturing the peaceful heart of the meeting is our calling in this tumultuous year.

## Urbana-Champaign Friends Meeting

With pandemic protocols no longer in place, Urbana-Champaign Friends Meeting has experienced rebirth. We decided at the June 2023 Business Meeting that masks were not required and food permitted in the meetinghouse. The “Ad Hoc Committee to Reopen the Meeting House” laid down its charge two years and eight months after being created by Business Meeting. Many attending immediately flung off our masks and our meeting began a steady process of regeneration. At Meeting for Worship we are blessed with rich ministry from a variety of voices, often emerging from the monthly queries. Although we mourn the loss of valued Friends through death and relocation, we have also welcomed new members and attenders and Friends who have moved from other meetings as active participants in Urbana-Champaign Friends activities. We have renewed our fellowship as we gather before and after meeting to sing, share in a potluck, or attend a book discussion or presentation.

On multiple occasions this year, we have welcomed members from near and far into our meetinghouse and onto our grounds. Celebrations of Life for longtime Friends Mariellen Gilpin and Christopher Jocius drew crowds overflowing our worship space: from our meeting, from Urbana-Champaign, from other Illinois monthly meetings, and from Illinois Yearly Meeting. These included many relatives from far-flung states. We will miss Mariellen for healing those in need and for her spoken and written ministry. We will miss Chris for his spot-on book recommendations for individuals and for his long service on the Library Committee.

Last year we received a grant from Faith in Place which allowed us to plant 27 native shrubs and trees. In September we held “A Celebration of Trees” that included thanks to all who helped to secure and execute the grant, much catered food, and a tour of the new plantings by the expert who designed the landscape plantings. The event drew many locals. In November, a longtime member of the Peace and Service Committee celebrated her 80th birthday at the meetinghouse with a potluck and a fundraiser for three local and international organizations. She invited many members of Champaign-Urbana organizations who fight for social justice. On another occasion a group went out into the community to sing Christmas carols at the County Jail. It was such a success, with detainees and guards singing carols along with us, that we sang at the jail again this spring.

Our events calendar is once more full to bursting. This winter we joined together after worship to read and discuss excerpts from Thomas Kelly’s *A Testament of Devotion*. We listened to talks after meeting by the Eco-Justice Collaborative and by Dawn Blackman, steward of Randolph Street Community Gardens. This year our Stone Soup Supper and Talent Show, a fundraiser sponsored by the Peace and Service Committee, took place inside the meetinghouse after two years on Zoom and last year’s outdoors. In late April, we listened to a QuakerSpeak video, using it to spark discussion.

We are challenged to offer youth religious education for 8-9 children ranging in age from 3 to 16; we suffered a hiatus of almost six months. When a member felt a calling, First Day School for younger children resumed in October, using the FGC curriculum, *Sparkling Still*, as a model. So far, the children’s favorite lesson has been “God Created.” They crayoned the Genesis story on poster board which has become the backdrop for other Bible stories. The children have gained in articulateness and poise weekly when they report back to meeting on what happened in class. This winter, First Day School for older children has resumed; they too are reading Kelly’s *A Testament of Devotion* during Meeting for Worship.

We are eager to maintain our connections to Friends who are distant or have not returned to the meetinghouse. Members of the Ministry and Care Committee sent comic valentines to those whom we have not seen recently in meeting. During Meeting for Worship and Business Meeting, we continue to share a Zoom connection with distant and local Friends. Our problems with the audio on the Zoom connection have greatly diminished. Attendance on Zoom has dwindled to a few, but worship in person has burgeoned.