

New Garden Friends Meeting
2020 State of Meeting Report for the North Carolina Fellowship of Friends
October 2021

Margaret Webb, our pastoral minister, began our first meeting for worship of 2020 with the following reading:

If you could see the journey whole, you might never undertake it, might never dare the first step that propels you from the place you have known toward the place you know not.

Call it one of the mercies of the road: that we see it only by stages as it opens before us, as it comes into our keeping, step by single step.

There is nothing for it but to go, and by our going take the vows the pilgrim takes: to be faithful to the next step; to rely on more than the map; to heed the signposts of intuition and dream; to follow the star that only you will recognize; to keep an open eye for the wonders that attend the path; to press on beyond distractions, beyond fatigue, beyond what would tempt you from the way.

There are vows that only you will know: the secret promises for your particular path and the new ones you will need to make when the road is revealed by turns you could not have foreseen.

Keep them, break them, make them again; each promise becomes part of the path, each choice creates the road that will take you to the place where at last you will kneel to offer the gift most needed—

the gift that only you can give—
before turning to go home by another way.

— ‘For Those Who Have Far to Travel’ by Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace*

In her message on that First Day, Margaret reminded us that love would accompany us on whatever journeys we would undertake and that “we can do hard things.” At that time we at New Garden Friends Meeting (along with the rest of the world) could not have imagined how 2020 would unfold, that we would soon embark on an unwelcome collective journey through the COVID-19 pandemic. And we didn’t know that, following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Greensboro’s own Marcus Smith, and many others, the summer of 2020 would erupt into civil unrest and a call for our country to reckon with the racial injustices of our past and present. Margaret’s guidance, along with the support, guidance, and care of the entire NGFM community, helped us take those first steps from the place we had known towards the previously unknown challenge of being a faith community navigating great strife without the ability to gather in person for worship, fellowship, or the work of the meeting.

However, the challenges of COVID-19 led to many opportunities for us to experience the working of the spirit. As a spiritual community, we had to reflect on what we valued most about being part of NGFM and figure out how to preserve those things during such isolating times. We also had to communicate well with each other and remain flexible as we navigated this new situation.

Staying connected to each other became our first priority, and everything else we valued and wanted to do depended on finding new ways to stay connected. We are grateful for several technology-savvy New Gardeners who very quickly helped transition meeting for worship from our meetinghouse to Facebook Live and Zoom. Our first virtual meeting for worship was on March 22, 2020, and we learned that our pastoral minister's gift for delivering thought-provoking and inspired messages extends to the online format as well. We are grateful for her flexibility and for the technical volunteers who stepped up on short notice (and continue to help us). It has been an unexpected blessing that Friends who are homebound or living too far to make the drive to Greensboro have been able to join us for meeting for worship and other meeting activities. In addition, we had several guest ministers such as the Reverends Phil Gulley and Kay Royloff from Indiana and Minnesota, respectively, who were able to join us from their homes. About fifty households participated in our Zoom meeting for worship each week and many others watched on Facebook, either live or at a later time.

Aware that Friends were missing the fellowship they had shared over coffee or carry-in meals at our meetinghouse, our clerk of meeting has led Zoom community fellowship gatherings at 1:00 PM on some First Days. As a community we became more comfortable online now and often these conversations and connections also happened naturally after the close of meeting for worship. Our committee meetings and religious education programming also moved online shortly after our first online meeting for worship. The members of Meeting on Ministry and Counsel noted with gratitude how the life and work of New Garden hadn't seemed to slow down despite our physical separation from one another. Along with their ongoing work, in 2020 each NGFM committee wrote an updated description of their committee for the NGFM Handbook.

A few specific instances when our community felt the working of the spirit amidst the pandemic included: an online renewal of vows in celebration of the fiftieth wedding anniversary of two New Gardeners; Facebook storytimes for our youngest Friends (where various New Gardeners volunteered to record a reading of their favorite picture books); and our Adult Forums with activists and community leaders, including some out-of-town speakers who might not have been able to join us in person, such as George Lakey, who shared his experiences and knowledge about uprisings and coups.

New Gardeners found ways to safely continue our beloved Christmas traditions, including an online Simple Christmas, an online Christmas Eve service, and our holiday Honor Cards program. The challenges of being safely socially distant gave rise to new programs that have enriched New Gardeners and helped us stay connected, such as an opportunity to listen to and reflect on poetry that our pastoral minister shared on Facebook every Wednesday afternoon; organized and informal efforts to check on and support our most isolated senior Friends who live in retirement homes or are otherwise shut in; and a program called Friend to Friend, where individual New Gardeners were paired and had weekly conversations guided by prompts about spirituality, childhood experiences, values, etc.

We are grateful for the working of the spirit in the formation of an ad hoc Medical Advisory Group of doctors at NGFM who continue to provide safety protocols for our community and also, through email and our newsletter, advise us about safe personal practices and local vaccine availability based on the latest COVID-19 developments. The work of this group has ensured staff safety for our pastoral minister, administrative assistant, religious education coordinator, and custodian, who need to be at the meetinghouse. The work of the Medical Advisory Group has also been invaluable to New Garden volunteers such as our Caring Friends group, which has been providing ongoing, COVID-safe caregiving to families and individuals in need.

Backing up a bit to "pre-Covid" times, in late 2019, Meeting on Ministry and Counsel began a several-month-long discussion about the importance of creating a safe, inclusive, and welcoming

environment at NGFM for transgender people. After MM&C had some clarity about the issue, we supported meeting-wide education, including an Adult Forum and meeting for worship with visiting Friends minister, Brent Walsh, who shared his journey as a transgender man. In addition, some members of MM&C introduced the idea of pronoun stickers by attaching them to their nametags. Finally, we made stickers available at the nametag table for all members and attenders. We also provided information sheets to explain this important issue of inclusion and social justice and how it relates to the use of pronouns.

Also in late 2019, the New Ideas Group formed at New Garden as a clearinghouse for individuals who want to share ideas about improving our community that don't clearly fall under the purview of a particular committee. This group has done a wonderful job of hearing New Gardeners' concerns and creative ideas, sharing that information with the appropriate person or committee, and reporting any developments or outcomes back to the community in our newsletter. When the group formed in 2019, we couldn't have anticipated how important this outlet would become when COVID-19 and social-distancing presented unique challenges to our normal, more informal ways of communicating concerns to one another.

Early in 2020, several New Gardeners felt led to respond to the global climate emergency and were inspired by College Park Baptist Church and Jamestown Friends Meeting, who had recently installed solar panels. This group formed the Solar+ Energy group and proposed solar panels for our meetinghouse as well as an outreach program to help local families make their homes more efficient. Solar+ Energy organized a called meeting to share and discuss their plans, and they raised money for the solar panels, which were installed in September. This group continues to do outreach and has partnered with Community Housing Solutions in Greensboro to help low-income families save energy and money.

In 2020 we also experienced the working of the spirit in our efforts to address social justice issues. In response to the death George Floyd and others and to our growing awareness of racial injustice, in August of 2020 NGFM adopted a Minute on Becoming an Antiracist Faith Community, which was discussed and revised until we reached consensus on this version in February of 2021:

In committing to the goal of becoming an anti-racist faith community, we know that confronting our failures will be difficult and painful. Guided by faith and grace, we are willing to accept this challenge and to do the necessary work to discern the ways our meeting's structure and practices may be preventing us from achieving our goal. We see this work as essential if we are truly to live our Quaker testimonies and recognize that of God in everyone.

As one step in the work of becoming an anti-racist community, New Garden Friends Meeting will ask committees and business meetings to use the following queries when making decisions: "Does the process we are using (or have used) to make this decision support New Garden Friends Meeting in its goal to transform into an actively anti-racist faith community? Does the decision we have made support NGFM in moving toward this goal?"

In addition to drafting the above minute, in July of 2020 we held a called meeting to discuss what actions we can take to become an antiracist faith community. Those actions have included training for committee clerks that emphasizes the importance of the question above (in quotes) during all committee meetings and decisions. For example, using the guiding question above, our

House Committee actively sought out and hired a Black-owned business to repair damage to our meetinghouse after a tree fell on it during a windstorm the last week of October 2020.

Our Peace and Social Concerns Committee began including suggestions for “Antiracist Actions You Can Take” each week in our newsletter. These suggestions included links to Black-owned businesses as well as reading and viewing recommendations. We put a Black Lives Matter sign on our property along New Garden Road and drafted a meeting-wide statement on Marcus Smith, who was killed by police in Greensboro in 2018 after being hogtied in a position where he could not breathe. We see these actions as growth towards a deeper commitment to becoming antiracists as individuals and as a faith community, but we know there is much more work to do.

Throughout 2020 we continued our efforts to clarify our ongoing relationships with other Quaker organizations. Even before the challenges of COVID-19, we struggled to identify New Gardeners who understand (or who have an interest and are willing to learn about) our long-standing relationships with organizations such as NCFE, PFF, PFYM, FGC, FUM, FCNL, FCNCL, FWCC, AFSC, and Quaker House. As a result, we have difficulty finding volunteers who can be actively engaged with these organizations and bring information, resources, and action items back to our meeting so that individuals and our meeting as a whole can be aware of and involved in the work of these Quaker organizations. In November NGFM held a called meeting to clarify what each of these organizations does and to discuss our ongoing commitment to and involvement in each. Monthly Meeting for Business and Meeting on Ministry and Counsel continue to discern how to move forward.

And finally, when the tree (mentioned above) caused significant damage to our meetinghouse in late 2020, we were grateful for an active and knowledgeable House Committee that worked closely with our insurance company and several contractors to have the repairs made.

Like many faith communities, we continue to grieve the loss of many lives to COVID-19, as well as other, less tangible losses. We are also continuing our work to understand racism and antiracism (as well as our roles in both) in new ways. But our pastoral minister may have known us better than we knew ourselves in January of 2020 when she reminded us that love would accompany us on our journey and that we could do hard things. The challenges of 2020 grew our meeting in unexpected ways and deepened our commitment to our Quaker values, to each other, and to our broader community and world.

Prepared by: Molly Haile in collaboration with NGFM’s Meeting on Ministry and Counsel