

2021 Clerk's Annual Report Mark Ratliff

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to be a central concern within our community. For most of this year we continued to meet online via Zoom. When vaccines became available at the beginning of the year we had hoped that we could soon return to in-person meeting for worship. However an increase in infections due to a new variant of the virus prompted us to proceed cautiously. We formed an ad hoc committee including healthcare professionals who met regularly to assess the situation and make recommendations to the meeting. In October the meeting decided to re-open the meeting house while asking that all members and attenders be vaccinated and everyone present continue to wear masks. In-person worship has been integrated with our continuing online meeting creating a 'hybrid' configuration that allows both in-person and remote participants to worship together. We continue to enjoy participation from members located in other parts of our country and around the world. To support this hybrid configuration we upgraded the WiFi network and employed a laptop connected to the existing hearing assist system to broadcast from the meeting house while projecting remote participants onto a screen above the facing benches. HEPA filters and carbon dioxide monitors were installed for additional monitoring and protection.

Our Adult Religious Education program included over 13 programs. The topics included: Quakers in Costa Rica, immigration, community safety & peacemaking, Quaker decision-making, Arch Street Meeting Preservation Trust, Emmet Gowin's photography, individual member's spiritual journeys, discussions on parking and placemaking at the meeting house, and other programs led by the Worship & Ministry, Peace & Justice, and Care & Counsel committees.

Children's Religious Education activities continued to be held remotely for most of the year. In December of 2020, we held a remote Christmas program, in which children took turns reading lines from the Christmas story and the "Amazing Peace" poem by Maya Angelou and also shared a wish for the world. Families received monthly spiritual care packages through June. Our traditional soup and lasagna dinners normally held at the meeting house were instead organized as take-out meals. The proceeds from the dinners went to Mercer Street Friends. In early fall the children began meeting together monthly, outdoors, focusing on rebuilding their connections to one another. Now that the meeting house has re-opened, the children have joined us in meeting for worship and attended First Day classes.

The Peace & Justice committee continues to lead bi-weekly vigils in support of Black Lives Matter. The vigils have seen an average of 15-25 people from Newtown Friends Meeting and the surrounding community standing firmly in public opposition to white supremacy, systemic racism, and abuses of power by law enforcement. Through these vigils we have forged relationships with Newtown Borough Police, strengthened ties with members of local Friends Meetings (especially Southampton Meeting), formed connections with other like-minded individuals in the community, sparked conversations with many different passersby, encouraged countless drivers inclined toward our cause, and raised awareness among less engaged citizens. The meeting continues to be an active member of POWER Bucks, which is affiliated with a state-wide organization of over 50 Pennsylvania congregations committed to racial and economic justice.

Our Worship & Ministry committee led efforts to strengthen our member's connections with one another and deepen our worship. During the warmer summer months a separate meeting for worship was held outdoors, providing an opportunity for in-person worship. The average attendance of these gatherings was about 20, including 2 to 3 children and 1 dog. Passersby were intrigued by this outdoor gathering with some deciding to join in worship. The committee also led a series of programs titled

“Searched by the Light” which focused on "the Light Within ... [that] Reveals who we are, including what we would prefer not to see about ourselves, and leads us out of spiritual darkness or dryness."

Our Easter program, titled “Walking the Way of Peace from Palm Sunday to Easter: A Response to the Capitol Hill Riot”, was held online via Zoom. The Worship & Ministry Committee presented a Quakerly interpretation of Holy Week stories suggesting that the Father of Jesus was not a God of wrath murdering his son to atone for human sins, but rather a God of Love willing his son to accept the cross in the name of Love and thus to bring about someday our human at-one-ment. The Peaceable Kingdom! Special invitations were sent to the high school students of the meeting and several joined the program. It was a delight to have families join in the program during this time of isolation.

The meeting has been working hard to come to unity regarding construction of additional parking on the grounds, and more broadly, on our vision for the use and care of the Meeting property. Having lost our ability to park in the lot adjacent to our property we have secured an agreement to park at the Stocking Works which is a 5 minute walk from the meeting house. Priority for parking in the limited number of spaces currently available on our property will be given to those with mobility issues and families with small children. After many meetings with Newtown Borough engineers, committees, and council we finally received approval for engineering plans describing an extension to our existing parking area and construction of an additional parking area on another side of the meeting house. These plans include catchwater basins and plantings that will address stormwater runoff along with detailed plans for protecting existing trees and replacing trees that would need to be removed for construction. We are now considering how best to move forward while balancing our concerns for the aesthetics of our grounds, the environmental impact of the construction, and our desire to provide a welcoming experience for all who visit our meeting house. We have held several threshing sessions allowing participants to voice their concerns and recommendations. To help prepare us for the process of decision-making Arthur Larrabee delivered a program on “Seeking a Deeper Understanding of Quaker Decision-making” which included an interactive presentation on the roles of the Clerk and members of the meeting in the decision-making process. This entire process has been an opportunity for us to deepen our worship and our practice of discernment in our threshing sessions and meetings for business. This process of careful listening to one another has deepened our sense of community.

Over the course of the year three members died, one member resigned, and five minor members and two associate members reached age 21. Two applications for membership and a request for marriage under the care of the meeting were also received.

	2020	2021
Total Members	345	341
Full Members	335	333
Adult	296	299
Minor	39	34
Associate	10	8

Targeted individual outreach was made to all inactive members (about 150), to all young adults age 18-25 (about 50). Sixty five cards were sent for graduations, illness, and grieving and care quilts shared with those in need. We continue to communicate with members and attenders via our monthly newsletter, regular website updates, Facebook posts, weekly announcements, and articles published in the Newtown Patch, Advance of Bucks County, Bucks County Herald and the Times Publishing Company. Most care contacts were done by phone. Efforts were also made to support families who experienced loss without being able to hold memorial meetings.

We continue to draw on the diverse set of skills and experiences of our members who are engaged in committee work. Our nominating committee has done an excellent job working with committee clerks to identify and recruit candidates for various positions including the new Clerk and Assistant Clerk of the meeting. Recruiting has been more challenging this year due to some member's reluctance to commit to new/additional teleconference meetings and the challenges of navigating the technology required to participate in online meetings.

Despite the many challenges we faced in the past year members of Newtown Meeting have remained engaged, have faithfully sought guidance from the Spirit, have worked together to follow our common leadings, and have supported one another in community.

Newtown Friends School, which is under the care of our meeting, has weathered the COVID-19 challenges of 2020-2021 with creativity and innovation. NFS delivered face-to-face instruction, with a variety of mitigation strategies in place, throughout most of the school year. NFS also offered a fully online learning option for students who chose to learn at home. The success of these multiple, simultaneous strands of programming was grounded in large part in the hard work and dedication of the school's faculty and staff, who embraced opportunities to try new things while still nurturing the traditional, close connections among members of the NFS community. NFS remains financially healthy, with an enrollment higher than the past 10+ years. Goals for the near future include building continued academic excellence, supporting student and faculty well-being, and enhancing efforts to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion within the curriculum and school community.