

State of Society Report, Bellingham Friends Meeting (BFM) 2020

The year 2020 struck our Meeting like a storm rolling in. In February, concerned about a new virus in the news, we began refraining from shaking hands at rise of worship. Within weeks, understanding the COVID-19 pandemic better, we completely suspended meeting for worship in person, upending our plan to move to a new location last summer. Some Friends were relieved to find we could gather in virtual worship, sharing the sacred silence from our homes. But regular attendance on Sunday mornings fell by about half. However, some who were not nourished by online worship remained active in committees. And we have been enriched by new attenders and visitors from other states during our online worship.

After the death of George Floyd in police custody in May, amid the tempest of social justice activism that followed, BFM felt led to offer an online public forum that brought hundreds of local residents together for two hours of listening to the voices of people of color in our community, speaking about their lived experience of racial injustice — and hopes for justice. Generous donations of time and money by individuals in our Meeting made this extraordinary effort a success. We're eager to try again!

In September, we welcomed J. Lee Cook to membership in our Meeting. Although we were glad for the joyful life changes that necessitated our dear Friend's move to Montana, we have sorely missed J. Lee's leadership and inspiration.

The election, with its blizzard of untruths, challenged us to seek the Light, whether through political action, participating in the election integrity movement, or simply seeking that of God in neighbors, friends, and family across political divides.

Several years of Spirit-filled but painful work to find unity regarding the participation of individuals accused, charged, or convicted of sexual offenses made significant progress as a result of the labor of our Safe Quaker Community ad hoc committee (SQCC). Friends found unity to approve two documents establishing best practices: "BFM Confidentiality Guidelines" (in July) and "BFM Guidelines for Attendance" (in November). Both are available on our [website](#).

However, our pain around the past attendance of a sex offender has not ended. That person is married to a longtime Friend and member of our Meeting. He acknowledged his situation after the Meeting became aware of his conviction of a Level 1 offense as a result of a plea bargain. Level 1 offenders are considered at lowest likelihood to reoffend, and their names, held in a state registry, are not made public. We are not of one mind on this case, or the topic generally, nor of one feeling or experience. Disagreements, hurt feelings, and unresolved issues remain. Pastoral Care committee began a "listening project" to hear and attend to this wound in our Meeting. Still, by year's end, some had not yet felt fully heard, or felt that our experiences and feelings have been discounted. Some felt unable to welcome any sex offender into worship; others wanted us to be more welcoming to all. Some held both feelings. We lost attenders because of these issues. Bellingham Friends know that the documents yielded by SQCC work and approved by Meeting are only tools—not the resolution itself. Much work remains, with more healing and bridges to mend. But we labor on together in faith and hope.

Over the summer, the Racial Justice Working Group that presented the online community forum began meeting with our Social and Environmental Concerns committee. The joint gatherings have yielded advocacy for climate justice, racial justice (including supporting Black Lives Matter and creation of an Indigenous/First Nations truth and reconciliation commission), and help for the homeless citizens caught in the “perfect storm” of pandemic, economic downturn, high housing prices, and winter weather. Building on the Land Acknowledgement our Meeting adopted in 2019, the committee developed and presented a Truth and Reconciliation Resolution to encourage Washington State to investigate and remedy the historical and ongoing oppression and injustice toward Native Americans here. The resolution was approved in December. The Meeting also signed onto the Whatcom Human Rights Task Force public statement opposing white supremacy.

The meeting’s finances and Finance Committee activity were heavily impacted by the pandemic; 2020 revenues were only two thirds of budgeted amounts. But expenses were even lower, and thus the Meeting is on firm financial footing going into 2021. The biggest financial news was that even though there were three quarters of losses, the final quarter led growth in our invested assets of about \$32,000 — a roughly 15% gain.

Despite the pandemic, the search for a more permanent Meetinghouse continued. Late in the year we seriously considered purchase of a building site. Though there is apparent unity to eventually purchase, likely beginning with land acquisition, a suitable site has not yet been agreed upon.

With less work related to in-person meeting, our Nominating Committee was able to fill all crucial roles. We were grateful for Friends’ continued willingness to serve our Meeting during a time of trials.

This year’s storms tested us in many ways. Sometimes our Meeting showed fissures and stresses. Other times the challenges brought out the best in us, as in the cases of a Friend doing weekly shopping all year for an elder who does not drive, and another elder without a computer continuing to join regularly in worship by telephone. We see the many challenges ahead, but have faith that our living testimonies will continue to bless and sustain our fellowship.