

## Spiritual State of the Meeting 2005 Atlanta Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

*Do you respect that of God in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern? How can we make the meeting a community in which each person is accepted and nurtured, and strangers are welcome?* From Quaker Faith and Practice, of Britain Yearly Meeting.

*We see the meeting as a growing, diverse and constantly changing community where every First Day we welcome new people. A growing number of seekers find meaningful worship here and are drawn into this community. An Adult Religious Education Class, a Spiritual Nurture Group and a weekly Bible Study offer opportunities for small groups to support and deepen spiritual journeys.... [Yet,] we often find it hard to know how to be welcoming, accepting and nurturing as our numbers grow and it becomes harder to know all who worship here. When we consider what the meeting needs now and the spiritual gifts that we would like to offer we name: compassion for each other, wisdom, love for the Spirit, finding ways of embracing each other, finding something of value in the "rain that must fall" in each life, recognizing what good things we already have, loving people in spite of—even for—their limitations, openness to what community members say to us, courage to speak to people when we feel strongly about their ministry, and that each member be able to find that of God in everyone.*

From Ministry and Worship 2005 State of the Meeting Report, Atlanta Monthly Meeting

### **Spiritual Health and Growth of the Meeting**

Atlanta Friends wrestled with the spiritual health of the Meeting during 2005. Creating an awareness of the process of Quaker worship amidst dissonant messages was and continues to be our challenge. As we reflect upon our year, we reaffirm that the Spirit may lead us in non-traditional ways. During the year, our experience of worship collectively and individually varied, from finding the corporate worship on First Days rich and nurturing with the gift of vocal ministry through Spirit-led messages, to Meetings full of popcorn, political or accusatory messages that left worshippers angry, tense or unsettled. Ministry and Worship committee sponsored two forums to help us consider how to deepen our worship and vocal ministry. One focused on the article, "The Divine Source of Vocal Ministry," by Benjamin Lloyd, *Friends Journal*, and the second focused on "Four Doors to Meeting for Worship," by William Taber. Both were well attended and provided a space for very personal worship sharing. In the words of Ministry and Worship, "We share a commitment to a gathered Meeting for worship where a palpable sense of the presence of God brings us together."

The religious education program is a growing community with a healthy number of families that sustains 5 classes, averaging a total of 25 children each week. Many of the same teaching volunteers recommit year after year. The committee continues to search for new volunteers so that the spiritual health of the children can be nourished not only by parents teaching their own children but also by the larger community.

The Nominating committee also searched for new volunteers as 27 positions of responsibility, more than usual, became vacant during the year. Yet, many stepped forward by the end of the year, leading the committee to conclude, "We are struck by the vitality of this Meeting, the willingness of newcomers and lifelong Quakers to find ways to serve the community."

The annual Gathered Meeting Retreat in March focused on spiritual growth of the meeting through its topic, "Quaker Spirituality: Seeking the Personal Image of the Divine." Wade Wright from the Millville Monthly Meeting and his traveling companion John Brady of Abington Meeting, both of Pennsylvania, led the retreat. Participants, a cross section of "seasoned" Friends and newcomers, commented that they were able to find ways to

interpret their own image of the divine and find ways of listening from one to the other about personal spirituality.

In our Meetings for Worship with Attention to Business, we spent a third of the year considering revisions to our Faith and Practice, proposed by Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association (SAYMA). Although lengthy, these sessions helped F(f)riends discern and meld individually and corporately held beliefs.

With great joy we approved in Fourth month the request of Gwinnett Worship Group to become a preparative meeting under our care, and in Tenth month we took under our care Anneewakee Creek Worship Group (ACWG) that meets in Douglasville, west of Atlanta. ACWG had formerly been under the care of SAYMA. In Atlanta, the numbers on any given First day are about 110 to 120. We welcomed into membership 6 persons: Sara Butler, Ceal and Mark Wutka, Derek Coulson, Megan Dowdy, and Lissa Place. We accepted Marguerite Rece's transfer of membership from Augusta (GA) Monthly Meeting and Jonah McDonald's from Memphis (TN). We also marked the death of Mary Elizabeth Jackson Zimmerman in First month. We held memorial services for Spencer Oedel, 19 years, and Neva Hamilton Fisk, a member until 2000, when she and husband George transferred to Newtown Square MM. Neva was remembered for her work with *Friendly Woman* and with the founding of Friends School of Atlanta. Our membership is now 145, 17 of whom reside out of the area.

### **Welcoming and Inclusiveness**

The Committee on Undoing Racism in Atlanta Friends Meeting provides a "Listening Ear" two First Days per month for anyone with a concern about racism. It also keeps a box in which confidential concerns can be left in writing. The committee arranged for Bert Skellie to offer a one-day workshop, modeled after a one-week workshop at Friends General Conference (FGC), "Practicing Ending Racism Among Friends," to help individuals learn how to hold themselves accountable for racist actions or failure to act when witnessing racism, and to role play different responses to situations involving racism.

The Care and Counsel committee prepared welcome packets for newcomers. At the rise of Meeting the person who closes meeting welcomes visitors, who stand and introduce themselves. Visitors may speak to members of Care and Counsel with questions about Quakerism and our Meeting. An announcement sheet is available for all about events in the life of the Meeting.

A group of parents, Religious Education teachers, and those interested in the Meeting's youth programs continued to meet monthly (Sept - May) to discuss ways in which to raise non-racist children in our Meeting. Another small group of individuals, "ORAIARH," or "Our Role As Individuals In America's Racial History," meets weekly to hold themselves accountable and support each other in working against racism in their lives. Participants in these groups make sure our library and First Day School have books relating to these topics and have made a bibliography of our holdings on these subjects. One individual wrote up a list of suggestions for talking to kids about race and class in relation to Hurricane Katrina.

The Finance committee launched a Raise the Roof campaign to replace the roof and insulation and change the heating/cooling units. These items will also help the Meeting use energy more efficiently. In addition the campaign will fund a new hearing assistance system that will contribute to the Meeting's efforts to be inclusive by making Meeting for Worship more accessible to those with hearing difficulties.

Discussion began about our email discussion service and we formed an ad hoc committee to set up some rules for use of the discussion list and to create a separate announcement list for those who only wanted limited announcements pertaining to the life of the Meeting. The committee developed queries designed to encourage those on the discussion list to consider more carefully the perspectives of others and also their own responses to those with differing opinions and perspectives. The early results are that those using the discussion list appear to be more sensitive to other's viewpoints and are responding with respect.

### **Outward Direction and Social Justice**

Atlanta Friends are active in many concerns. Peace and anti-war efforts, a women's shelter, prison concerns, assistance to individuals who work in public schools, legislative issues and Green Friends are some of the causes Friends support. In the spring we minuted our support for Joe Parko's witness of peace in the Middle East on a trip to Palestine and Israel with the delegation "Every Church a Peace Church." We continued to fund scholarships for university students in our sister community, El Sitio, El Salvador. We helped fund rebuilding in the Gulf Coast region in the wake of devastation by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita with donations to AFSC and grassroots organizations such as Common Ground. Two of our members undertook a long bike trip on the Natchez Trace to raise money for hurricane relief. ORAIARH members finished a brochure highlighting neighborhood safety and racial stereotyping and distributed it to households in neighborhoods near the Meeting and where members lived. They also sent it to churches, schools, city government organizations and neighborhood groups in Decatur.

We ask the Spirit to guide us in continuing to be welcoming and affirming of each other and the diversity of experience each of us brings to the meeting community so that we may "walk cheerfully over the earth answering that of God in everyone."

Respectfully submitted,  
Karen terHorst Morris  
Clerk, 2005