

Spiritual State of the Meeting Report, 2003

Friends planted Patapsco Friends Meeting seven years ago in the spirit of George Fox's early and persistent advice to meet together everywhere. We were led to provide for ourselves and for others whom we did not yet know an opportunity to experience the preemptive love of God, which speaks to us out of the silence. In meeting together we are practicing something old, walking a path well-worn, yet the mystery is that each meeting is new, surprising. We are in unity that the work of our meeting is to create a safe space where any who meet with us can stand in the Light, to see and share what God wills for each one of us in our measure.

Early in 2003, in First Day discussions and worship-sharing, we explored the Inward Light through the writing of George Fox and Rex Ambler's *Light To Live By*. These meetings raised the question: How does a faith that began in the 17th century with "Christ Jesus has come to teach the people himself," formed by a profound but surely heretical reading of the Christian scriptures, speak of Christ Jesus in the 21st century? Is there a place in our meeting for the Christ-centered Friend among Quaker Buddhists, Quaker Jews, Quaker agnostics. And what does "Christ Jesus" mean to the refugees in our meeting from Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and other "Christian" churches? To begin to address this question our First Day explorations continued with worship-sharing centered by Thich Nhat Hanh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. Since that time a group has been meeting on First Day evenings to study the Gospels using *Records of the Life of Jesus*. In the Fall, our explorations continued with a series of Pendle Hill pamphlets chosen to explore topics relating to Quaker spirituality and our personal spiritual journeys.

For some of us to sink permanently into these tender and spirit-led conversations would be our heart's desire. Our fellowship asks more of us. Through grounding us deeply in the Spirit it prepares us to meet the demands of our life together and of the wider world.

We are called to be tender to those in our meeting who are struggling with the diminishment of aging, who are being tested by the needs of children, aging parents and friends, who themselves suffer with physical or mental illness or care for afflicted loved ones. As we support Friends in these difficult times we ask, "How can we better prepare ourselves to meet these challenges in our own lives and to support others who face these challenges?"

We have an on-going concern for our children. First Day School was held year round and the children enjoyed a number of extracurricular activities. On Easter Sunday, they helped assemble personal hygiene kits for citizens in Iraq and they collected gifts for a needy family at Christmas time. A holiday sleepover was held for the middle school aged kids at the Mt. Hebron house in December. The Meeting has included in the annual budget funds for assistance with camp fees with the goal of encouraging every child in the Meeting (4th grade and older) to attend camp. We are thankful for our Religious Education Committee and First Day teachers. As our children grow we are concerned with how to best nurture their spiritual development.

We have witnessed to the wider world our concern for peace and social justice. A silent vigil to remember the victims of September 11, 2001 as well as those of the subsequent wars continued each Saturday for most of the year. It was difficult to sustain the vigil in the months that followed the onset of the Iraq war and it was formally laid down in October after two years. Our Meeting was among the founders of the Howard County Coalition For Peace and Justice and through this group, the Howard County Council was petitioned to pass a resolution against the war in Iraq. The resolution was not passed but we felt God's spirit at work in our community by so many silent and vocal testimonies to peace. In response to the despair that many feel during this frustrating and tragic period, a meeting for worship was called on March 21st at the onset of the bombing of Iraq and a

Spring Retreat was held with the theme "Finding Inner Peace in Times of Turmoil." The day included quiet reflection and worship sharing along with chanting and Dances of Universal Peace. The following day after Meeting for Worship, a walk was held at the Bon Secours Spiritual Center Labyrinth.

Patapsco Friends continue to prepare a meal once a month for twelve men living in a shelter for the homeless. Many Friends in our Meeting work with other organizations that need support. These organizations were introduced through a series of short talks during our monthly potlucks. One presentation described the Mediation and Conflict Resolution Center at Howard County Community College that mediates neighborhood, victim/offender, landlord/tenant, and similar community conflicts. A representative from Cease Fire Maryland was heard. We also learned about the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) that is trying to organize a new political/social advocacy group in Howard County comprised of a broad spectrum of religious and neighborhood groups. The final presentation was made by BRIDGE, another social advocacy organization similar to IAF.

From our small beginning we now have 30 to 35 regular attenders and 12 to 16 children in our First Day program. A Patapsco Friends Email Group was established through Yahoo to keep us connected and current. We are aware that not everyone has the Internet and that there is the need to communicate in other ways as well. Personal testimonies and spiritual understanding are shared through periodic publication of *The Quaker Heron, the Journal of Patapsco Friends Meeting*. Committee meetings, simple meals, monthly potlucks, Friendly Bunches, and picnics help build the interpersonal relationships so important in nurturing and strengthening our community. Patapsco Friends Meeting's members and attenders are rich in gifts of the Spirit. We know no better way to be welcoming than to share our gifts with those who are seeking and those who have found a home in our meeting.