Dover Friends suspended in-person Meeting for Worship in March 2020. We learned to use Zoom for worship, business meetings, and fellowship. Few of us expected that weeks of COVID distancing would stretch to months and now to a year. While we are grateful that virtual worship has reconnected us with Friends who live far away and those who could not attend for other reasons, after twelve months of virtual Meetings for Worship, we all feel a sense of loss and isolation. We miss sitting quietly in the worship space that connects us to our roots. We miss the spiritual connection of being physically together in silent worship. To some degree, we have adjusted to virtual worship, but many of us are still feeling lonely, spiritually isolated, and ‘zoomed out’. We reaffirm that our collective spiritual journey, rooted in our weekly gathering for silent worship, bonds us together in loving Friendship and serves the good of our local and world communities.

We mourn the passing of two dear Friends in 2020. We hold in the light those Friends who lost friends and family members and were unable to gather for meetings of remembrance. We hold in the light all Friends who suffered through months of loneliness and isolation. We remember with gratitude the work of all Friends and attenders who worked and sacrificed to help others through the difficulties of the last year.

Prior to COVID restrictions we had a growing community with many new attenders. Several new attenders and long-time Friends attended a series of Quaker Way gatherings to explore Quaker history and roots. Our fellowship before and after meetings was energized and rich. Several new attenders also participated in recovery programs and found support in our meetings for worship and other activities.

One of our greatest misfortunes of the last year is to have lost the momentum we had in welcoming new attenders. One attendee lost both employment and recovery housing and suffered a devastating relapse. Several attenders and members moved away from the area. While our Zoom attendance is similar to our usual Sunday attendance we see that virtual worship has sustained our core community, but not our growing family of new attenders. We are eager for the opportunities for growth that will come with warmer weather and the easing of COVID restrictions.

Many of our regular activities have been curtailed. Our prison ministers have been unable to enter the Strafford County jail. The Friendly Kitchen has needed to serve take-out, rather than family-style meals. Spiritual Breakfasts and Bible Studies have been fewer and limited to virtual gatherings. The Pastoral Care Committee and meeting Clerk reached out to members and attenders with phone, regular mail and email campaigns. We continue to support and communicate with Millicent, a student at the Kakamega Care Center. We value this vital connection to Friends of Kakamega. We remain connected to Friends in Cuba through NEYM Puente activities.

Our First Day School Committee hosted on-line activities for children and made some home visits, but Zoom activities were not ideal for our youngest children and the committee and parents mutually agreed to suspend Zoom First Day School for a few months. One family moved to Indiana in 2020 and Zoom First Day School did provide a nice bridge for their two children who regularly attended during their transition. One of our high school students is active in Young Friends and regularly attends Young Friends virtual retreats and participates in multiple focus group activities. We are grateful for the outstanding work of New England Yearly Meeting JHYM and Young Friends teams.

Despite the challenges of Covid-19, many leadings and activities have bubbled up and energized our meeting.

We added a Wednesday morning mid-week worship to our weekly schedule. Dover Friends Meeting is an active leader in a Sanctuary movement that has continued to grow – both as a local inter-faith movement and as a wider Quaker movement. The Sanctuary Renewal Team is actively working to raise funds to renovate the meetinghouse so we can provide sanctuary without violating building and fire codes. Several grant applications have been successful. A recent Zoom Concert for Sanctuary drew wide attendance, growing the community and reaching many new supporters. Participation in the Sanctuary movement has led many Friends to a deeper experience of the biblical roots of hospitality.
and sanctuary. Dover Friends Meeting is united in our commitment to provide sanctuary. All are welcome in our meetinghouse regardless of citizenship or immigration status.

Dover Friends meeting affirms that Black Lives Matter. Many local and national leaders have advanced the cause of racial justice in the past year. Dover Friends are called to be true allies to people of color and we hold ourselves responsible for identifying and eliminating bias for whiteness wherever it exists. Racial Awareness Workshop has continued online with growing participation as has the weekly vigil for racial justice in front of the meetinghouse. We drafted a minute in support of Black Lives Matter and we fully support Quaker movements to atone for crimes against indigenous people. In the words of Ruby Sales, “white supremacy is a spiritual malformation.” We hold ourselves individually and collectively responsible to oppose white supremacy wherever it is encountered.

Dover Friends Meeting, through Friends Fiduciary Trust, has the responsibility of maintaining the T. Wister Brown Cemetery. Many Friends are concerned for its present and future condition. At times people camp on cemetery land. We are challenged to address this issue in ways that address both our care for the dignity of all people and our care for cemetery land. The process of selling burial plots and maintaining the grounds is complicated and time consuming. The burden of care has largely fallen on the Trustees and the Finance committee who call on all Dover Friends to learn about the cemetery and contribute to decisions about its operation.

The financial health of meeting is sound. The Finance Committee acknowledges that Dover Friends excel at not spending money; our challenge is to better plan for the spending of money when the need arises. DFM is over dependent on a small group of financial supporters. As these supporters ‘retire’ from actively supporting meeting, we need to adjust accordingly. Many new attenders don’t have the means to donate money. Many people contribute time and energy. The burden of financial planning has been unduly placed on the Treasurer and the Finance Committee in past years. All Friends must be aware of our financial health and share the burden of meeting financial needs.

Dover Friends Meeting is a spiritually vibrant, active, and healthy Monthly Meeting. Over the past year, as in years past, we have remained on course as a community that is deeply spiritual and faith led while simultaneously being somewhat ambivalent to traditional meeting structure and organization. We are working together to preserve and nurture our collective spiritual practices as well as adapt the committees and organizational structures that sustain our community. The social distancing required during this pandemic has slowed our progress over the past year but has also strengthened our community in many ways. We see brighter days ahead and we are grateful for all gifts great and small that we received in the past year.