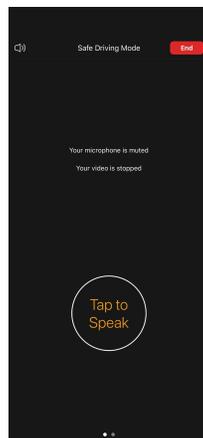


report of ministry 2020 -2021 (January 18 2022)

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread. - William Stafford

When I consider the past year(s) of ministry and faithful engagement in my life, the thread that comes to mind is "connection". New avenues, new ways of being in the world, and embracing the old traditions of travel in ministry have all found a way into a shape of sharing news of faithfulness with Friends of the New England Yearly Meeting and beyond. Sarah Gant, as a former member of my support committee and current spiritual elder, has likened this ministry to one of a "bee". I'm flying about, lightly pollinating, maybe not even intentionally leaving things as the dust falls wherever I land. My direction is in the moment, perhaps a winding path, but the overall shape of my flight is within a geography of Friends of New England.

The past years of ministry feel like a shape that emerged at NEYM sessions in 2020. After taking an intentional break from traveling since February 2020, coping with the onset of the pandemic, and all the concerns it entailed, I was still listening for clear direction. I remember during a Sessions prayer time (online) feeling disconnected from the Work I'd engaged in a year before. Suddenly, I was compelled to get up from my seat, grab a bible, open it, and read a passage. What I remember most is not the words I shared - but the action of laying my phone on my chest, and pressing the big button that said "Tap To Speak". No video, no feedback, no feeling of anything in the gathered (where we gathered exactly?) body of Friends.



It was a "yes" moment - and answer to the prayer of "how now God?" and the reply was "follow me". The message was followed by some instant encouragements (via text!) from a number of Friends in many places. This Path was laid out before me. "This is still required of you, the connections are going to be in all new forms, and I will give you one step at a time."

During the next few months, I completed a process of listening with my meeting (Fresh Pond). The clearness committee of November 2020 found me still called to Gospel Ministry. It was unclear at that time if that ministry was to be under the care of the meeting. Discussions continued into the spring with the meeting, but I continue to hold the wondering of if/how this ministry is to emerge under the care of a body of Friends.

The next year (until present time) has been overshadowed by a worldwide pandemic. Much of the shape of "being a Quaker" as I knew it began to shift. How much of that was an inner journey? How much of that was outer circumstances? It is challenging to sift through the changes.

I had been searching for a "competency" as Samuel Bownas would call it - employment that would financially and mentally release me to ministry. I thought I had found that in the office position at a local church. Once the pandemic happened, it was clear my health and safety was unclear in the demands of that position. I kept that job for a year and was able to help the congregation navigate the first few months of zoom and facebook live. I established their first online Annual Meeting procedures. When I left, the pastor insisted I was "sent from God to help them in that time of transition". I think when we are faithful we all in every moment are "sent by God" - but I am glad they found me faithful and helpful.

During that time I was given an unexpected leading. Friends Meeting at Cambridge was looking for a half time, temporary facilities manager. I knew I was qualified, and it was easy to apply and agree to the position. Friends Meeting at Cambridge was the last meeting I traveled in gospel ministry to in February 2020. On that day, I stood reluctantly and shared a long and surprising message. Their endorsement is the last on my travel minute. The pandemic then shut our meetings to in-person worship soon after that visit. The first Meetinghouse I entered after the pandemic was the empty Meetinghouse in Cambridge. At a time when I was wrestling with God around not being in meetinghouses anymore, suddenly I found myself with a key to a huge meetinghouse, where I began to sit a few mornings a week in the balcony in prayer. It felt like "holding the space" and certainly was practice for me. This seems to me to be one example of the Path unfolding. I have since spent hours in prayer in that empty meetinghouse. Eventually, Friends returned to in person worship there, but I have not worshipped yet in that space in a First-Day meeting. I am still employed there, my position has been named permanent and I continue to try to be as helpful and supportive as I can to that community. Is it "ministry" - this employment? It opens connections. It grounds me in a tangible way. It is grappling with the "not spiritual" parts of a facility - leaking toilets, sporadic Wifi. It is a learning lab, in the ways that any space is when we listen to the Divine.

So much more followed. As meeting communities wrestled with the questions of change and adaptation during the pandemic, I found myself creating spaces for sharing across geographical distances to have those conversations. The "Quaker Gatherings" facebook group was formed, and continues to be a place for Friends to share questions and learnings.

At the same time, I was wondering about physical place, and geography. In 2019 our family moved to Methuen Massachusetts. A small spit of land between the mill towns of Lawrence and Lowell, along the Merrimac. Every day I drive along that river, through the cities that have been decimated by the effects of the pandemic, and think about the history of faithful survival. I remember the mills that collapsed and were rebuilt, and the singing protests insisting that people need "Not only Bread, but Roses too!"

I suspect some of that geography lent itself to the musings and creation of the Mill City Quakers experiment. In prayer and conversations with Friend Kenneth, I kept feeling led to invite folks to some sort of community worship, a meal, and creating a space. Due to the pandemic, those gatherings

happened sporadically. We rented space at a local Church in Lawrence (where I had traveled years before), sometimes gathered at my home, and hosted some online worship gatherings at various times when it felt right to do so. We aren't clear to call ourselves a worship group - we are more of a "pop-up worship duo" and are patiently listening for each new "happening". We have a growing list of local Friends and Quaker-curious folks and neighbors, and hope to gather outside at my home in the spring. In a time of so much online gathering - I am still nudged towards the spiritual engagement found in physical in-person spaces.

In the past year, I have traveled occasionally to those meetings on First day that are open again. Smithfield, Allen's Neck, Gonic. I have worshiped Sunday evenings with Lawrence-Andover Meeting, which in non-pandemic times meets right down the street. We met for a few months in-person recently, and I am sure we will again as the weather turns warmer. Our Faith and Practice asks us to consider if the meeting most local to us is to be the one of our membership - and I continue to hold that question. I have not heard any clear direction in terms of membership at this time, beyond my feeling that the whole of the body of New England Friends is "my people".

I have tried to remain spiritually connected via Zoom. As a physical learner, my experience of unprogrammed worship online is not nourishing, and often confusing. In a time where there is so much struggle with work and family and raising a teen, spending time in a space that leaves me sad and ungrounded is not wise. I keep trying. I have not met in person with anyone from my own meeting (Fresh Pond) in person for worship since March of 2020.

There have been small but growing examples of connection in this time. The ability to learn from Friends, to connect examples of faithful ministries, and to be a resource for things both spiritual and technical has been a wonderful opening. I continue to be the social media manager for NEYM, and now also for "The Gatherings" - a wonderful book that introduced me to Indigenous concerns of Maine. Sharing the stories of faithfulness on these platforms, choosing what to share and when, selecting quotes and graphics for memes and messages, continues to be an educational part of my days.

I have adhered to a daily practice of retirement and prayer. This has for the past year looked like a daily morning time of devotion, which has been a practice of respite in a rhythm that has been deeply helpful.

I have begun hosting a number of conversations on zoom, and recording them and providing resources for later viewing. I have co-hosted book groups and talks and continue to be amazed at the good faithful work going on in so many places. I am blessed to be one of the folks who helps to create the space, and share the good news of Friends. I maintain an active website of resources that can be easily accessed for Friends.

I am actively traveling to meetings by invitation. Most recently, Sarah Gant, David Coletta and I have begun responding to meetings' requests for accompaniment. I am clear that work will continue, perhaps eventually under the care of NEYM Ministry and Counsel.

I plan to travel in accompaniment with Jay O'Hara and Kenneth Glover in the spring. They both have their own travel minutes and anticipated direction in ministry - and accompaniment as a fellow traveler feels like a rightly ordered shape emerging, particularly with those two Friends.

At that start of the pandemic, I saw a need for sharing information around changing worship platforms. This soon became a Facebook group - "Quaker Gatherings: best practices and creative explorations", which bloomed into a group of over 600 Friends active in their local meetings. This has been a pathway

for me to grow into a service of digital ministry across many groups and Yearly Meetings. I've recently started a series of hosted conversations around various meeting communications topics, recorded and shared, hosted and shared primarily on that platform. The reach of that group is growing, and I am grateful to support that specific place for timely information and conversations.

I was named last year to the Permanent Board of NEYM. After about 8 years of regular visitor attendance at that board, it felt right to say yes to this invitation. I also have stepped up to serve as recording clerk for the finance committee for the next 2 years. Although that service is often longer, I was clear to say yes only to a limited timeframe, in order to leave space for what might emerge in time.

I have served in tech hosting support capacity by invitation for NEYM, FWCC, and Vassalboro Quarterly Meeting. In most of those roles I was clear to be of support in the moment, but not "lead" the team in any way. That made the support "right sized" for me, and I am scheduled to continue that support in a few places in the future. I have probably said "no" to twice the amount of invitations I have said yes to, however.

I have a beloved informal network of Friends who meet with me to hear news of my travels, wonder about new paths and work, and provide encouragement. While I am aware this is not a replacement for the support of a specific, regular gathering of support - it has been a wonderful experience of learning and exploration and filled a need in this time. Those Friends have wondered if/when I should seek more formal support. Some of that is wrapped up in my questions about what support might look like in my meeting of membership - and what membership even means to me in this time. I continue to pray and explore next steps. I am grateful to look back on the events and learning of the past year with deep joy, even in such a challenging time in our world.

In faith and service,
Kathleen Wooten