

Pacific Yearly Meeting

Site Exploration Team

Report to Representative Committee 2022

We want to report to you what the PacYM Site Exploration team has learned about the Mount Madonna Conference Center as a potential site for a hybrid 2022 annual session of Pacific Yearly Meeting. When we first started thinking about the idea of a hybrid annual session, one of the concerns that was most pressing for us was the point that our Youth Programs Coordinator, Keenan Lorenzato, has been stressing for some time, which is that the children and teens have not found any community with us adults through online meetings. After more than two years without being able to gather together with our young people, we hoped to be able to find a space we could share with young Friends, teens and Young Adult Friends.

Before I start telling you about Mount Madonna, though, some of you may be wondering why we investigated only the Mount Madonna campus and not the campus at Walker Creek Ranch, where we have held our annual sessions for the last several years that we were meeting in person. Since the beginning of COVID-19, Walker Creek Ranch, which is a property owned and operated by the Marin School District, has laid off all of its staff and they do not have plans to hire new staff until June of this year, so we had no one to talk to about our plans for annual session. Any staff we would be working with on the site in July would be new. Also, in thinking about the site, it was challenging to think about what could be suitable locations for hybrid worship and plenary sessions, assuming that we want to bring around 100 people or more to our in-person location. Finally, the week that Walker Creek was able to assign us this year overlapped with Friends General Conference, which is an activity that we know is quite popular with many PacYM Friends.

Meeting During a Pandemic

The staff at Mount Madonna are well aware of the constant changes necessitated by the pandemic and have assured us that a reservation could be canceled without a financial penalty at any time, though of course we would want to give them and ourselves a good lead time if we were to change our plan and move to a fully remote annual session. **Our hybrid annual meeting would be premised on the idea that in-person attenders would be fully vaccinated and boosted and would have a negative test for COVID before coming to the site. Mount Madonna's staff and residents are all vaccinated and boosted, with the exception of some of the children under 12.**

Children's Program

The site exploration team read with interest the letter sent to them by the Children's Program Committee before we made a visit to Mount Madonna this year in January, and we took notes about the concerns that they expressed. We met with a number of Mount Madonna's staff members, ate lunch there and went on an extended tour of the campus that included the school up on the hill. Nevertheless, the Children's Program Committee continues to have concerns (see their report in the RepCom advanced packet), and a second visit to Mount Madonna was organized to inspect the space and ask more questions.

JYM

JYM's need to gather in person is fundamental to its structure and success. At Mount Madonna the JYM would be in the Orchard House, near the Dining Hall, with camping space available in the field below the dining hall as it has been in other years at Mount Madonna. The Orchard House has a nice, open space that looks out onto a deck with a view over the valley.

Exploration Committee

Those who visited the campus in January 2022 included Laura Magnani (PacYM Clerk), Keenan Lorenzato (Youth Programs Coordinator), Jay Cash (PacYM Ministry member and Hybrid Meeting Specialist), and Heather Levien (PacYM Assistant to the Clerk); and Bronwen Hillman (PacYM Admin Assistant and Arrangements Clerk) and Sandy Kewman (Past PacYM Clerk) were present electronically.

Costs

We went on a tour of the campus that included a lot of places that people might choose to stay indoors and places suitable for camping. The cost of the facility is higher than we have been paying, but we will continue with our policy of "paying as led," and the Finance Committee assures us that we have the funds to cover the costs. Similarly, there will be costs for the hybrid capabilities, and we hope that Friends attending on Zoom will be able to help with that. But all of us will pay what we can and know that the community is prioritizing our coming together. Two of the buildings that we previously used for the Children's Program, Farmhouse & Farmhouse Annex, would be available to us, and we were able to look in at the Farmhouse, which is much as it was in 2013.

Food

We had an extended discussion with Mount Madonna staff about food and the issues that our community had the last time that we had an annual session there. She was sorry to hear that we'd had so many difficulties. The Mount Madonna community still remembers our community with great fondness. As a spiritual community, they do seem to be making a real effort to reach out to us and engage on those issues that were upsetting to people in the past. Savita had, before we arrived, negotiated for us to be able to bring our own snacks for the Children's and Teen Programs, so long as no meat or fish products are involved. The Site Exploration Committee was offered a snack that had a very extensive array of options, including crackers, nut butters, nuts, fruit, cheese, hummus, cookies, coffee and tea. Likewise, the noon meal that they served us had a large variety of vegetarian options for protein. For those of us who remember the bread baked on site, we can confirm it is still most scrumptious.

On the second visit, on February 18, members of the team were able to ask again about the possibility of having a kitchen available for those who have special dietary needs and were assured that the kitchen in the Seminar House can be used for this purpose. Laura Magnani also asked whether it might be possible to have the café open, since so many of people attending annual session enjoyed being able to purchase snacks in addition to their meals. They are open to considering opening it for us.

Technology

Since Mount Madonna is a conference center that hosts yoga retreats which have started to become hybrid, they have installed state-of-the-art equipment to facilitate hybrid communications, and their staff is well-trained in using this equipment. The worship and plenary sessions would all be hybrid, in the main room that we used for plenaries previously, and some of the interest groups and other smaller sessions could also be hybrid.

Mobility

As we walked up and down, we considered how to assist those who might have difficulty with the hilliness of the campus. We assume that we will need at least one golf cart to help people move up and down hills, and Bronwen Hillman is looking into the logistics of renting at least one.

So, Friends, we know that this location is one that brings up many fond memories for some of us and a number of anxieties and far less enthusiastic remembrances for others. Certainly we won't be able to gather together in person in the numbers that we have in the past, but there will be online options for those who still feel that coming to Mount Madonna in person is not a choice that feels right for them. Still, we wonder whether there might not be enough of us able to make the trip that it would be something worth the effort.

My family and I first went to Mount Madonna in 1998, the second year that we attended Pacific Yearly Meeting. Admittedly, we didn't have a lot to compare it to; we had been once before to Chico in 1997, and while we had enjoyed that enough to come again, the college campus was hot and full of a lot of concrete. Mount Madonna, with its hills and trees and grass, seemed so beautiful by comparison. It was that year that we met a number of the people that we would see year after year: the Allens, whose son Robert was a year older than my son Alan; and the Sissons, whose son Sam was someone both my sons looked forward to seeing year after year. We all met when our children were small, and the kids grew up together and wanted to come back year after year to see each other.

We understand that there are some adults who have negative memories of Mount Madonna, about food they didn't care for or religious icons they didn't relate to or the fact that the teachers didn't want us to touch their things. I ask my sons what they remember about Mount Madonna, and they do remember that they weren't always crazy about the food. But they remember the campus itself with great fondness: the pond and the hill running up to the high school, and the hot tub and the preschool where they played with Winnie Sunshine.

What can we say, Friends?