

# Baltimore Yearly Meeting

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Dear Friends Everywhere,

As we gathered together this year, we were called to “try what Love will do.” The 337<sup>th</sup> annual session of Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) was held at Frostburg State University in the rolling hills of Western Maryland, where we explored William Penn’s advice. We seek here to share some of the struggle and Light that this week brought us, particularly with regard to our continuing relationship with others in the Friends United Meeting (FUM) community. We know that living honestly in loving community as Friends is both difficult and deeply rewarding.

In our opening retreat, Maria Bradley asked us to explore Penn’s quote in the context of some of the other “fruits of solitude” to deepen our understanding.

We are too ready to retaliate, rather than forgive, or gain by Love and information. And yet we could hurt no Man that we believe loves us. Let us then try what Love will do: For if Men did once see we Love them, we should soon find they would not harm us. . . . What we Love, we’ll Hear; what we Love, we’ll Trust; and what we Love, we’ll serve, ay, and suffer for too.

In the opening plenary talk, our Friend Betsy Meyer continued us on our journey with an exploration of John 15:12-17. In these verses, Jesus calls us to be his friends rather than his servants and challenges us to love one another not just with human affection, but with Divine Love—the piercing, consuming, awesome Love that God has for us. Betsy challenged us to consider how we are called to lay down our lives not only in the actual, physical sense, but also in other ways such as putting aside our own prejudices, agendas, and our need to be right. She reminded us that God is always teaching new lessons of love. “We may think we understand love and then we meet a person or a situation that challenges us. God is patient with us. God helps us let go of the parts of us that stand in the way of love, calling us to radical humility.” She left us speechless.

In our Bible study, Michael Newheart invited us to explore and deepen our understanding of I Corinthians 13, which tells us that “Love is patient; Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast; it is not proud. It does not dishonor others; it does not insist on its own way. . . . Love never fails.” Michael also invited us to put this chapter into the context of the entire book, which makes clear that all the parts of the body of Christ serve a purpose, that Love is what gives that body life and holds it together, and that our aim must be to sustain our spiritual community.

We were enriched as always by the diversity of our experience shared in reports and messages in our business sessions. As we began work once more on the thorny issue of our Yearly Meeting’s membership with FUM, we were given the opportunity to read minutes and messages from many of our monthly meetings about the questions—both spiritual and financial—facing us with regard to FUM. These minutes and messages represented a remarkable diversity of both insight and minute-taking style, but made it clear that we are not in unity to withdraw from FUM. In our business sessions, we continued to strive to find common ground and foster common understanding of the issues before us. After such long work and deep pain, it remains difficult to see where God is leading us. Still, we became clear that we are called to remain engaged with others in FUM, as well as to witness for equality. As we continued our

business together, we were reminded of how much other beautiful and sustaining work Friends in BYM have done this year. We know that we must be faithful in doing all the important work of the Yearly Meeting, in spite of the "elephant in the room"—our relationship with FUM.

We are heartened by the response of others in FUM to our intervisitation program, which is a source of energy within our Yearly Meeting. We rejoice in the growing numbers of visitors coming to our Yearly Meeting, and we encourage the other Yearly Meetings of FUM to visit not only us, but each other. At the same time, we seek to increase our visits to other Yearly Meetings and to try to meet the challenge of extending our intervisitation to the farthest reaches of FUM.

Friends working in BYM's camping program gave a moving and joyful presentation about their program this year, and even those of us who have never been involved in the program shared in their love and excitement. They spoke of hard days, long hikes, singing in sign language, and catching water snakes, all of which lead to a lasting relationship to nature and each other.

As always, the younger Friends among us modeled an atmosphere of joyful community for the Yearly Meeting as a whole. Our Young Adult Friends hosted the second annual "living history" program, inviting Friends of all ages to play games about William Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania. Our youngest Friends led the business session in a song about George Fox, complete with hand motions, and the Young Friends' report included metaphors about pirates and knights, complete with a homemade horse. Laughing at themselves and getting the rest of us to laugh at ourselves, Young Friends pretended to be pirates seeking the "X" that marks the spot that holds our community together. They found it in our hearts. The co-clerk of our Youth Programs Committee called us to speak directly with younger Friends if we want to better understand the youth in our Yearly Meeting.

Riley Robinson, our General Secretary, also contributed to our journey with his reflections on the vibrant spiritual life of BYM. Instead of a litany of accomplishments and duties, he regaled us with a story of a metaphorical and actual journey. He ended by relating his reply when asked how he could work such long hours. "It's different," he said, "when people are praying for you."

Clinton Pettus of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) gave the annual Carey Memorial Lecture. His background as a Virginian sharecropper's son and as a psychology professor and college president has brought him to the constructs upon which he acts, something which is true for all of us, as he explained. These constructs govern our behavior and our desire and ability to love and to hate. Love, as he defined it by citing the words of M. Scott Peck, is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." If you love your enemy, he suggested, you can let the animosity and hate in the heart of the enemy inspire you to honesty and fairness. You can, as Gandhi did, conceive of how your enemy can help you reach your goals.

We leave our annual session with renewed resolve and some additional clarity about our ongoing concerns with FUM even though we still lack clarity as to where God leads us next. We recommitted ourselves to our relationship with FUM in patient witness to our experience of God's all-inclusive love. We are clear that we have made progress, and we carry a sense of expectation and faith that our patient waiting on Divine revelation will be rewarded. Even as God is patient with our folly, we must be patient with waiting for Way to open, for all is made clear in God's time. "Though now we look into a mirror darkly, then we shall see face to face." We must reach for perfection even while realizing we may never be perfect. To this end, we continue to hold all Friends in the Light and ask you to do the same.

The many lessons of love this week have not fallen on deaf ears. We must continue to strive towards Divine Love, to love patiently, to love without boundaries, to love our enemies and let them inspire us. This, then, is the challenge in our theme: "Let Us Then Try what Love will do."

Yours in Love,

Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)