

Acting General Secretary's Report to Interim Meeting

In a conference of the staff of Yearly Meetings and other Quaker institutions across the continent and the United Kingdom, I was asked to use 6 words to say what I do. My answer was "I assist Friends in building our community." I missed the mark of 6 by a word, but I also understated the task ahead of us. The entire Yearly Meeting needs to reimagine our community. We need to take advantage of the opportunity to reconsider how we make decisions, how we serve Friends, and what it is we want the Yearly Meeting to do.

The challenges since the spring of 2020 have been many and varied. Our community faced a crisis in our finances created by a gap between our hopes and our reality that created real doubts about how to afford the promises of the approved budget. That crisis became acute when the COVID-19 pandemic reached our area and shut down the office, our Meetings, and nearly everything else. We had to isolate hundreds of thousands of dollars in anticipation of refunding fees paid by camp families for the 2020 season. While we were trying to absorb these problems, the financial markets crashed and the paper value of our unrestricted reserves shrank dramatically.

For the rest of our community, events that have happened every year and have been important parts of our lives had to be cancelled on a moment's notice. We couldn't have Third Month Interim Meeting, the Spiritual Formation Retreat was cancelled, a Young Friends conference didn't happen, groups that have gone to Catoctin and Shiloh for years were told they weren't allowed onto the properties. Then, in early May, it became necessary to announce the closure of the entire season for BYM camps.

These events, and the hundreds of smaller effects, led to weeks of fear for many of us, including the Yearly Meeting staff. Just as with so many people, inside and outside our Yearly Meeting, we didn't know what was happening for our families, for their health, and for their jobs. David and Jane had to consider how to close a program that already had hundreds of children registered, tens of staff hired or waiting to be hired, projects to make the properties ready started. Jossie Dowling, our then out-going Youth Programs Manager, had to find a way to support teenagers who lives were already in upheaval and how to hold graduation ceremonies without being able to be together. Khalila and the entire STRIDE community had to reimagine their work and the meaning of their relationships with families about to send their children to camp. Mary and the Development Committee had to rebuild all of their fundraising efforts in an environment that no one had ever seen before. All the staff had to work from their homes without knowing if we would even still be employed soon. Every one of them did amazing work despite all of these fears, and they have found new solutions that will benefit us for years to come.

In the months since I accepted the opportunity to serve as the Acting General Secretary, much of my time has been spent looking forward to what is next for our Yearly Meeting in the new landscape that we face. That has also meant trying to find some perspective on what has already happened in this year. In the weeks leading up to, and following, Annual Session 2020, many Friends raised questions and concerns about decisions that had been made. The concerns are real, deeply felt, and the sense of pain in them has been heard.

Hearing those concerns has been difficult for many. People have felt misunderstood, defensive, and hurt. Those responses are also real and deeply felt. In response, I have been looking at the many conversations that happened among the staff, with the members of various committees, and with the broader Yearly Meeting all at once. Everyone had questions, and fears, that couldn't be easily answered. Yet choices had to be made quickly without knowing those answers. I have seen points in time where one person is receiving and responding to tens of emails within an hour. I have read email threads that say one thing, are heard differently by the recipient, and the reply back is heard differently yet again. My goal was to try to learn what occurred, and more importantly, what we can learn. The lessons I see are both subtle and obvious.

The obvious lesson is that there are no perfect decisions when they are made in a crisis. There were times that a decision was sought from a committee the day before they met, then a new decision was sought at the time of the meeting, and by the next day was irrelevant. Choices were made, and acted upon, before everyone affected by them could fully understand what had been decided. Detailed, carefully thought out, explanations didn't exist. Sometimes people didn't feel they had the opportunity, power, or privilege to raise doubts and concerns. I am confident that every person was trying to find the best path forward for our community. I have had conversations with some people about these decisions and their effect already, and will continue to try to help everyone to understand what happened and how to avoid the same problems in the future.

The subtle, and deeper, lesson is that we are faced with an opportunity to reconsider how we manage our Yearly Meeting. Our community relies on an intentionally deliberate method of corporate decision making. Sometimes it is frustrating in its slowness, and sometimes the power of the result can renew our faith. But we have seen that sometimes speed is the only option and that we don't have the tools for effective decision making in haste. At the same time, we have learned that things always done one way can actually be done differently, from worship to committee meetings to spiritually enriching programs. We also have new voices, many of them coming from our younger Friends, pointing out that we need to ask better questions for any decision that we make and do a better job of assuring that everyone is able to participate fully. And we have a smaller staff who have seen their jobs changed in ways they never imagined.

We need to consider new processes that retain the faith-filled power we have while being able to be nimble enough to be speedy when needed. We also need to consider what new opportunities have been presented by the adaptations the pandemic has forced on us while recognizing that we cannot have everything we want simply by promising ourselves that we will support our dreams. And all of this must include the new voices that can feel left behind or excluded, and truly integrate the questions we have committed ourselves to ask as we seek to discern what we are led to do.

I think that the Yearly Meeting will rise to these opportunities, and look forward to seeing how we grow into them.