The Baltimore Yearly Meeting Annual Epistle

DRAFT 1 August 7, 2022

Revised November 3, 2022

To Friends Everywhere

Baltimore Yearly Meeting concluded its 350th year together as we reflected on the theme “Consider the Wildflowers: Rooted in History, Growing Toward Spirit”. This year we gathered in a hybrid format at Hood College in Frederick Maryland with 316 persons registered including adults, Junior Yearly Meeting children, Young Friends and Young Adult Friends. Of these, 147 attendees were on campus for at least one night and 90 were virtual attendees. The challenges for the Presiding Clerk and Tech volunteers were substantial but all rose to the occasion. With the use of multiple computers and considerable expertise, Yearly Meeting Friends were able to see and hear one another, whether on Zoom or in-person. Our Presiding Clerk was able to go back and forth with increasing skill over the week, including everyone in the discussions.

The annual pre-session retreat was led by Clinton Pettus (Stony Run) and focused on developing and sustaining trust using his Trust Circles methodology. He shared that trust is paramount in bringing people together and building a community where everybody belongs. Time together in small groups created the opportunity for participants to test out these methods. Pettus’s Titanium Rule - “Do unto others as they would have you do unto them while maintaining your values and needs” – was the message of the retreat.

The three Opening Plenary speakers, all seasoned Friends, explored “Re-membering the Past: Seeking Lessons Learned Relating to Racial Justice, Native Peoples and the Peace Testimony”. They each explored how colonization affected our faith and practice relating to racial justice, Native Peoples, and the peace testimony, and how it continues to affect our faith community today. Each gave a brief history of Quaker activities, personal experience, and next steps for Quakers to consider within the specified context.

Cy Merriweather-deVries (State College) described racial injustice in colonial America including the how Quakers were involved. She noted that while many Quakers did not practice slavery themselves they did benefit from the fruits of it. She shared sociologist Dr Robin M Williams fifteen core values of American society, which he used to confront the centrality of race in U.S society. She shared both personal experiences of disrespect by the White community and also historical events that have been lauded in American history which are actually racist. Friend Cy asked that Friends in BYM need to think about what our biases are so that they can be addressed. Finally, the question was posed: Where do we go from here?

Ruth Flower (Adelphi) told us of the injustices perpetrated on the Indigenous Peoples of the US during its settlements with 90% of the population dying from epidemics and starvation. Quakers were complicit with this and became colonists in using land that was taken after the Indigenous Peoples had been driven out. Quakers were also involved with running boarding schools for indigenous youth, stripping the youth of their language and culture, with the goal of assimilating them into the predominate White culture. Friend Ruth reflected that knowing the historical truth gives Friends an opportunity to learn from and take responsibility for the past and to reflect on what native peoples have to teach us. It is a good time to reach out to native peoples to build relationships of respect. Friend Ruth shared that her world view of her own youth was turned around by working with VISTA. She now sees through the eyes of her children and grandchildren as to what the world could be.

Bette Hoover (Sandy Spring) shared the historical roots of the Peace Testimony beginning with George Fox in the 17th century. Her personal experience of living in a number of countries where there had been violence pointed out the disconnect between our testimonies and what needs to be done in the world. She asked us, “How do the complexities of our interconnected world affect how we live our testimonies?” Friend Bette reflected on the relationship of peace and justice concluding with the chant, “No Justice, No Peace!” She asked what would happen if we turned the Peace Testimony on its head and focused on justice first. This would require generational healing and deep spiritual reckoning, not shying away from our discomfort.

Friends found these facts hard to hear but necessary for us to know the truth. The Plenary Speakers final query to us was “How does Spirit lead us into a future that takes responsibility for the harm done and is welcoming to all people?”. This set the stage for the important, Spirit filled, and frequently painful discussions which occurred in Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business during the week.

One member spoke to us on several occasions of her deep pain and spiritual longing for Friends to realize that the only way to move forward was to give up our racist ways. She admonished White Friends to teach themselves how to be with People of Color instead of asking to be taught. Several other Friends of Color supported this message and spoke eloquently of their own pain and concern for BYM and its future. Each said that White Friends need to do their own work; Friends of Color should not have to do it for them. White Friends were reminded that even though the Yearly Meeting does some good works with camp, it’s not enough to help Black children make up for all that White children have in terms of safety in the world and opportunities to be confident. We were also called to own our poor treatment of several members of the community who are Friends of Color.

Quaker business process was called into question as too convoluted and therefore taking too much time, causing pain to those who had to wait for changes that impact People of Color directly. Concern about how the process is used against those who advocate for change was also brought forward.

As the body was working to assimilate these messages, the Clerk and Friends in attendance recognized that the importance of the work of moving BYM towards becoming an anti-racist faith community needed to take priority over many of the usual items of business on the agenda.

Friends at Annual Session heard how we are stewarding our resources, both human and fiscal. The Yearly Meeting office continues to work very hard and short-handed doing the Yearly Meeting’s work. BYM continues to carefully manage its funds and the Yearly Meeting is in good fiscal status at the 2022 budget half way point. The 2023 budget supports the work that the Yearly Meeting has deemed important in the deep spiritual sharing that has occurred at Annual Session. This includes funds for the End of Life Working Group to publish their book, Growing Diverse Leadership Committee for Juneteenth work, Reparations Action Working Group, and the Working Group on Racism for anti-racism training and healing spaces.

There were a myriad of events to feed our hearts and spirits during the week. The inter-generational workshop led young and old to connect with many of our Quaker ancestors near and far. Each day Worship with Concern for the State of Our World was held. The Global Majority Hangout provided a safe space for Friends of Color to visit and relax each mid-day. The variety of workshops available fed our minds and our spirits, both virtually before Annual Session began and during Annual Session. Our spirits were gladdened by the mid-week all age ice cream social and we laughed together at the Coffee House. As a way to At the end of each day, the Inter-visitation Lounge provided a welcoming and nurturing space for Friends from outside Baltimore Yearly Meeting to share their experiences and develop new friendships with BYM Friends with the support of nourishment. Our bodies and souls were also fed during Annual Session by the week-long project from the Right Relationship with Animals Working Group to encourage us all to try a plant based diet. Their ministry of cookies, daily vegan jokes, vegan deserts, and Friday’s vegan challenge with 75 Friends participating stimulated lots of thoughts and discussion. Friends Church of Baltimore held a Meeting for Worship in the manner of programmed Friends early Saturday evening celebrating the Spirit with joy.

Emily Provance, member of 15th Street Meeting in NYC and full-time traveler in the ministry, gave the Carey Memorial Lecture Saturday evening. She reflected that to change the world we need to change hearts. The world is desperate for us to be in committed and vulnerable relationships with one another so that hearts can be changed. Transformation is changing our hearts and the hearts of others through many small acts of love in relationships that exist over time. A single action will not get the job done. We need faith that God’s love will be effective.

Friend Emily also told us that the world is in desperate need of deep listening to God. This requires us to be in community and to engage in corporate discernment. Trust is required for this to happen. Trust requires us to speak up even when uncomfortable; the community to deeply listen to what is said; the sense of the meeting to be confirmed in God’s time; and that the community remain open to continuing revelation. People who have not engaged in the discernment process may have trouble accepting the outcome because they were not part of the journey.

Finally, Friend Emily challenged us with the question “Why do Friends insist that discernment stops at the Yearly Meetings?”. Quakers are very diverse and wide spread, yet by coming together we could make the world better. There is common ground to be found across Quakers internationally. How we could discern together will likely not look like any process we use now. It would be a huge task, never completely finished, because we never complete discerning God’s will. We could become a new people if we make the commitment that it is possible to solve problems that are beyond human reason.

The gathering was bittersweet as we looked more deeply at what BYM has done, both positive and particularly negative, over the past centuries up to the present moment. We reflected that to become more vital in the world that Friends need to be more assertive about being an anti-racist community through our actions. Both with present members of BYM and those who we may hope will join us in the future.

The exercise during Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business on Saturday may give BYM a better sense of Friends thinking. These data during 2022-23 will help to develop Spirit-led activities to move us toward being a pro-active anti-racist faith organization. We left Frederick knowing that we have much work to do individually, as monthly meetings and as a Yearly Meeting and look forward with joy to being together again next year.