

To Friends Everywhere,

Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) started our 349th year together as we gathered in Spirit electronically for annual sessions following the theme “Courage, Faith and Hope to Love Across our Differences.” In this virtual format, we found new ways to connect deeply with Friends who joined us from nearby towns and from thousands of miles away. Entering Meeting for Business in silence, with microphones muted, encouraged deep worship. Even as we grappled with technical challenges, we found Spirit in small groups for bible study, worship sharing, and play. We celebrated that Friends of Color created new daily gatherings during this annual session that included Friends from unprogrammed and programmed meetings within and outside Baltimore Yearly Meeting. Unstructured gatherings at lunchtime and at the rise of Meeting captured some of the serendipity of encountering Friends on campus. We delighted in the community found by our youngest Friends, but sorrowed that our high-school Friends were not able to join us. Our time together has re-immersed us in the richness of our BYM community and given us the strength to continue our quest to love across our differences.

Our opening retreat was a safe space to share our grief, pain, confusion, and hopes. We acknowledged we are living in a perilous time of five pandemics, causing dis-ease and death worldwide: Covid-19, racism and bigotry, police brutality and militarization, climate change, and extreme economic inequity. Margaret Benefiel described this as the liminal space of the in-between times: what was normal is gone and the new normal has not yet emerged. We hold her advice to us: that we stay grounded through daily personal spiritual practice; that the hard work of being in community is itself a spiritual practice; and that community is fundamental to discernment as we ask, “What is mine to do? What is ours to do?”

Together, we seek the courage to stand in this ambiguity, attempting to respond faithfully to the Light we have, listening and discerning, moving step by step. We have long opposed racial injustice in the wider society. Last year we declared that we aspire to be an anti-racist faith community. As we looked back over this first year, we reviewed our good faith efforts and acknowledged some recent failings. Friends shared experiences of deep wounding related to racial power dynamics among BYM Friends. White Friends are still becoming aware that they must face their own complicity with the powers and principalities of racism and white supremacy: not only the transgressions in our imperfect Quaker history, but also continuing transgressions in the present moment. A Friend of color expressed pain that while some White Friends acknowledge the difficult work before us, others are reluctant to talk; their hearts are not open. In this liminal time, Friends diverge widely in understanding our individual and corporate roles in the pain of racial injustice, yet we know that failing to act is still action nonetheless.

As we wrestled with this work, we acknowledged our strength and fragility and our need for both courage and faith. Our clerk ministered to us about our tendency to recoil from conflicts within our Yearly Meeting. He suggested that this grows out of our association of anger with violence. He named that we are in conflict over misunderstandings that occurred during the urgent financial crisis faced this year. He acknowledged pain, frustration and anger among BYM Friends and our staff. We heard in our opening plenary that the blessed community we yearn to create requires us to move past logic and rational thought and into contemplative awareness. We know that our faith is shown by our works. When we have the courage to abide in discord, we can break open our hearts, hear each other’s anger, and feel each other’s pain.

What is ours to do is grounded in our relationship with each other. Our work is not just making decisions, but the act of “being” a yearly meeting. Being in conflict in community takes on an aspect of holiness because we labor together, as if “together” is the only option. Community builds hope and, like courage, hope is contagious. Our hope that Baltimore Yearly Meeting will in time be a truly just religious community sustains us in this work. Many Friends have voiced a prophetic message that forgiveness and repentance requires us to change course. Our newly-formed Reparations Action Working Group has opened consideration of a Truth and Reconciliation process. We are sitting with the recognition that just as Zacchaeus’ first act upon repentance was to pay reparations, we may also be so led. We also aspire to be accessible to a wider community of Friends. As we work together to ensure the future of our yearly meeting, we hope that this year’s experiments with pay-as-led and with gathering online will prove viable so that we can welcome Friends from all income levels, locations, and digital access.

We closed our week together with the Carey lecture where Bridget Moix asked us, “What is Ending? What is Essential? What is Eternal?” As the old order ends, we stand in the Refiner’s Fire, experiencing the searing, searching Light as we seek Way forward.

Our history as a loving community is long and deep. We enter our 349th year together enriched and emboldened to love each other and all people across our differences. Our work is grounded in courage and sustained by faith. Our time together nurtures the hope that this love will yet lead us to the beloved community.

In the Light,

Friends of Baltimore Yearly Meeting