

Epistle of Baltimore Yearly Meeting Yearly Meeting 2025

To Friends Everywhere,

Greetings from Hood College in Frederick, Maryland, where the Baltimore Yearly Meeting gathered for our 353rd Annual Session from Seventh Month 28 to Eighth Month 3, 2025. This year, Friends came together from across Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia to worship together, make decisions together, break bread with one another, and share in the life of the Spirit. Our theme this year was “Guided by Spirit: Living Our Faith in a Challenging World.” As our theme statement reads, “Today’s world is rife with conflict [and] Friends face a host of social ills, including racism, materialism, and militarism set against a backdrop of climate destruction and the breakdown of political institutions and core shared values.” This week, through story and song, worship and action, lament and celebration, we strove as a united body to “let Spirit lead and sustain us as we endeavor to heal our broken world, bringing it closer to the Beloved Community for all.”

On Tuesday evening, we heard from Friend Lamar Matthew, who shared the story of his faith journey to Quakerism through gentle humor, well-earned wisdom, and joyful song. Lamar punctuated his story with lyrics from popular songs that marked important moments in his spiritual life, including “I’m Just Wild about Harry” as a response to meeting his husband, Harry Scott, III. It is in that spirit of making a joyful noise, that we offer this epistle to the Quaker world.

*Meet me here.
Won’t you meet me here,
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins?
There’s a balm in the silence
Like an understanding air,
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins.¹*

The silence was, indeed, a balm for our tired souls; “walking cheerfully over the world and seeking that of God in everyone” can be exhausting when the world resists the sacred pull towards love. But more than that, our shared silence in Meetings for Worship and Business rooted us deeply in the Spirit and helped us hear the divine echo in each other’s voices. Each morning, Friends centered down through Bible study, worship sharing, Experiment with the Light, and chanting, or by sitting quietly in the residence hall or cafeteria, greeting Friends over a cup of coffee.

¹ Verses from “Meet Me Here” by Craig Hella Johnson. “Meet Me Here” is the first movement of the epilogue to Johnson’s oratorio *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Johnson writes, “At its core, “Meet Me Here” is a folk style hymn which invites the participants to be open to meeting at a place which may seem difficult or painful, and to be open to discovering the healing and joy which can be experienced when we lay down the ‘ancestral sorrow’ we may have been carrying for generations and open ourselves to finding the healing together, excluding no one.”

One Friend in Bible Study noted that John 14:1, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” the first verse the study read, spoke deeply to her in these troubled times. Another Friend noted, “As a queer Friend, it was a balm to not stand out as queer, as *other*, but just another Friend on the bench, loved by Friends for being me.” However, another Friend wondered if we “were disconnected from the huge threat that is out there in the world,” and felt we “were only starting to explore how to respond to the possibility of an imminent collapse of our free society under the threat of autocracy.”

*We've been walking through the darkness
On this long, hard climb,
Carried ancestral sorrow
For too long a time.
Will you lay down your burden?
Lay it down, come with me.
It will never be forgotten,
Held in love, so tenderly.*

Our Yearly Meeting carries many burdens, but together, we bear the load lightly. In Meeting for Worship with attention to Business, we found way opening to entrust revisions of our child safety policy to camp staff and Trustees. In a special working session, Friends named fears and hopes around a proposal to change the governance of our beloved camping ministry. Friends expressed their concern that establishing Baltimore Yearly Meeting Camps as a single-member, not-for-profit Limited Liability Company could compromise the very Quaker character and identity of the program that has made it so special. At the same time, Friends expressed a profound hope for the future of BYM Camps. Friends believed the proposed governance change can be an opportunity to strengthen this ministry for the next 100 years, and allow staff to adapt to a changing legal and financial landscape.

Throughout the week, the hybrid Global Majority Hang-Out welcomed Friends who are dual- or multi-heritage, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Black, Pacific Islander, Brown, or West, South, or East Asian. At the same time, white Friends, moved by the Spirit to continue confronting racism within their meetings, communities, and the wider world, gathered for a separate, daily, facilitated conversation. And on Wednesday evening, our new Palestinian-Israeli Peace and Justice Working Group (PIPJ) joined with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Palestinian Activism Team to hold a viewing of *No Other Land*. This is a moving documentary about a Palestinian-Israeli collective of activists that won Best Documentary Feature Film at this year's Academy Awards ceremony but has yet to find a US distributor. This screening coincided with AFSC's issuing of a minute addressing the violence happening now in Gaza.

In afternoon workshops and interest groups, Friends gathered to learn about and discuss a wide range of daunting challenges, including violence in Gaza; white supremacy culture; the assault on LGBTQ+ lives; missing and murdered indigenous women; racial barriers to participation in monthly meetings; the loss of reproductive rights; and a hostile political environment at home. Yet one Friend noted that “although despair is real and should be heeded, its remedy is to act.” We were inspired and sustained by also learning of incredible peace-centered efforts to confront these threats, including AFSC’s Apartheid-Free Communities Project; tactical mindfulness; reparations; the Rooted Wheel framework; economic activism; and embracing lessons of resistance from our shared history. One Friend noted that often it feels energizing and empowering to have these discussions in a workshop setting, but seems so difficult to take new and innovative ideas into our Meeting Houses; her prayer was that we had the courage and mutual support to do so. Another spoke of our call to care tenderly for one another as we respond to the many frightening injustices surrounding us on every side.

Additionally, our General Secretary, in their report to Annual Session, gave an honest, challenging, and compassionate account of the burnout they and other members of BYM staff are experiencing, which has led to staff resignations, both recent and anticipated. They shared how their service as a chaplain in a hospital setting has been rewarding, both personally and professionally, and how it has reaffirmed for them the need for Quaker pastoral care in the world beyond our Meeting Houses. Friends in attendance were deeply moved to affirm our General Secretary’s testimony and find ways to better support them and BYM staff.

During Saturday night’s Carey Memorial Lecture, Friend Vanessa Julye spoke with prophetic honesty about her encounter with racial barriers in Quaker communities as she pursued her calling to ministry. She reminded us that good intentions do not negate the effects of traumatic actions, and challenged us to be honest about the role of the Religious Society of Friends in the history of systematic oppression and colonization. Through the stories of her own ancestors, Vanessa illustrated for us a complicated and painful narrative that runs counter to the simple story of a Quaker abolitionist past. She reminded us that we are just beginning a journey together to uncreate the legacy of white supremacy in our fellowship, and encouraged us to take concrete steps toward a new Society of Friends. Friends were deeply grateful for Vanessa’s forthrightness, compassion, and willingness to labor with us and alongside us.

*Meet me here.
Won’t you meet me here,
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins?
There’s a joy in the singing
Like an understanding air,
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins.*

And there *was* singing! Sometimes in unexpected places. Quakers do not let the sorrows of the world stifle our joy; indeed, joy is one of our most powerful acts of resistance. The morning chanting group was rich and deeply appreciated by the chanters. Each evening, Tuesday through Friday, Friends gathered in the chapel or auditorium to sing from the Quaker hymnal, challenging themselves to impromptu rounds—not all of which were ready for prime time. At our Coffee Hour showcase of Quaker talent, songs ranged from searing laments to lively folk tunes, young friends danced to “Cotton Eye Joe,” rounds were taught, and funny stories were shared (including a strangely decipherable version of Little Red Riding Hood). One Friend even sang “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” as an ode to deer ticks.

After a few early days of punishing heat and humidity, Friends were grateful for the always timely golf cart brigade that made the rounds of the Hood College campus. We enjoyed the laughter and camaraderie of spending a few minutes with Friends as we zipped from one activity to the next, not to mention the accompanying breeze. Then, like a miracle, late afternoon thunderstorms rolled in, clearing away just in time for our All Ages Celebration, held outside of the dining hall. After tipping the inflatable bouncy houses to drain them of rainwater, lawn games and general gaiety ensued, including a surprisingly competitive game of croquet. The rest of the week was unseasonably cool; no one was complaining.

Friends were grateful for the hospitality of the college (which opened their pool to us), the vegan cookie ministry, the Saturday afternoon vegan lunch, our tireless tech assistance, and numerous volunteers who welcomed us at registration, staffed the information table, and directed us to the right places. In particular, we are profoundly grateful for the presence of our Presiding Clerk, who in Business Meeting and many other settings, welcomes and centers us through her deep affection for this community.

*Then we'll come to the mountain;
We'll go bounding to see
That great circle of dancing,
And we'll dance endlessly.
And we'll dance with all the children
Who've been lost along the way.
We will welcome each other
Coming home this glorious day.*

Living our faith in a challenging world requires, not only courage and joyful resistance, but space for healing. This year's retreat, “Addressing Conflict: Strategies & Skills for Rooted Quaker Faith and Practice,” explored how Friends can constructively address conflict within our Meetings and move towards healing and reconciliation. It was organized by the Friends Supporting Friends Working Group, which is under the care of Ministry & Pastoral Care Committee. Our facilitators used brainstorming, small group discussions, and role play to teach us the foundational skills of knowing oneself, holy listening, holy speaking, and attempting repair. Participants learned how to examine messages about conflict we received in childhood, how to ask open ended questions that invite engagement, and what forgiveness looks like in a Quaker context.

Workshops and interest groups were also spaces for deep sharing, healing, and coming to know one another better. Friends explored the unspoken assumptions of Meeting for Worship that limit our engagement with the Spirit. Trans and nonbinary Friends discovered spaces of welcome and solidarity. We learned how to put our testimonies into practice. One Friend was reminded of the words of John Woolman, noting that Annual Session felt like a “precious habitation...[a place] to be safe, to be inwardly quiet, when there [are] great stirrings and commotions in the world.”

On Saturday morning, we held our annual Memorial Meeting for Worship. There were more Friends than usual remembered this year, and so the allotted time was extended to recall more Friends, more deeply. Several present noted that it was valuable as a chance to not only to learn more about the particular Friends whose memorials were read, but also a rich opportunity to learn about how to be a more faithful Quaker.

In thousands of small ways, we welcomed one another, not to the college, dormitories, or auditoriums, not to business meetings or workshops, or even Annual Session, but to the home within our hearts where we are somehow fully known. Not known, perhaps, in our particularities—we are, after all, separated by geography and distance and many other differences. Some of us come from small worship groups; some large and busy Meetings. Some of us live among rural farmland; some in bustling cities. We worship in century-old Meeting Houses and retirement communities and rented rooms. And yet, we are known. In this space, we are friends, and always have been.

*We are home in the mountain,
And we'll gently understand
That we've been friends forever,
That we've never been alone.
We'll sing on through any darkness,
And our song will be our sight.
We can learn to offer praise again,
Coming home to the light.*

We send to you, Friends everywhere, our love and our hope for peace.