

## **Epistle Annual Session 2024**

Greetings to Friends Everywhere:

The Hood College campus is a lovely place to nurture our Quaker community and do our Yearly Meeting business. The food is tasty and plentiful, the staff is welcoming, the dorm rooms are new and spacious, and the campus is compact. We welcomed many visiting Friends throughout the week. We enjoyed their presence and were enriched by their sharing.

BYM's retreat, led by Francisco Burgos, was rich with challenges. Participants were asked to notice when Spirit was challenging them individually, and recognize a collective call to each to be loving within this world as it is now. Participants were also invited to remember a time when they individually knew that Spirit was leading or speaking to them.

The youth were happy to be together. When asked what she liked best, one child, who looked to be about 8, quickly said “ice cream!” When asked what was second best, she said “games!” as she bounced up and down and smiled. Our youth program is small and growing; we still have not totally recovered from the pandemic.

The chapel's acoustics aren't great for business meeting, but they are marvelous for singing. A small group can sound like a great choir. For those who chose to sing – chanting around the morning queries or hymns after dinner - there was renewal from our time together. We had opportunities to deepen our faith through multiple worship settings. In addition to our periods of quiet worship around queries and meeting for business, we had the pleasure of participating in the vibrant worship sponsored by Friends Church of Baltimore. Also, we made space to recognize the Friends we lost in the last year, with remembrances of their ministry of availability.

All of this, along with the other morning groups and the cookie ministry of Right Relationship with Animals (a tradition of home-made vegan cookies), contributed to making a safe container in which we could openly share and be vulnerable, in both our business meetings and our evening programs.

There were several important highlights from our business sessions.

The camping program continues to grow and flourish. A beautiful video introduced us to Opequon Quaker Camp at Rolling Ridge. The campaign to fund the camp is going strong, and all Friends are invited to contribute to help complete our facilities at the new location.

The Indigenous Affairs committee shared their work to start a reparation process for the damage BYM Quakers did to the children of the Pawnee Nation. They have been in touch with leadership in the nation, written an apology, and proposed that we send \$20,000 over the course of two years to start to heal the harm we did when Quaker schooling deprived the children of their language, decimated their culture, and tore their families apart. An emotional and trauma-inflicting discussion followed. It became clear that this was the first small step in potentially a much larger effort to compensate for a piece of the harm we did. We were reminded that we do not get to

choose how reparation funds are spent; also, although we may desire to develop a personal relationship with those we've harmed, it is presumptuous to assume that friendship is possible.

This was followed by a moving presentation by Rania Maayeh, from Ramallah Friends School. She vividly described some of the horrors that are occurring in the West Bank and Gaza. And, she proudly shared how well the students at Ramallah are doing, despite the horrendous conditions in which they are currently living. The school has been a beacon of hope which nurtures the gifts and talents of the students and prepares them for the challenges of the world. The seniors all passed their International Baccalaureate exams this year, and most of them are going on to college.

Rania's presentation led the Peace and Social Concerns Committee to bring a minute to a business session for approval by the yearly meeting. Our clerk, Steph Bean, shared a concern that as we consider such minutes, we do so in a way that invites participation by the entire Yearly Meeting. Can this be done in a time-sensitive way? It was decided to send an immediate email to the entire Yearly Meeting with the proposed minute along with a minute on the Middle East approved at a called Interim Meeting in April; all were invited join the Sunday morning session. At that time, the minute was approved.

The wealth of projects being worked on by the yearly meeting has put an unacceptable amount of stress on both the staff and volunteers of the yearly meeting, which in turn is stress on the entire yearly meeting. A Friend reminded us that there are two empty positions due to lack of funding. How do we prioritize our resources going forward, so we wisely use our finances and wisely use the dedicated people working in the BYM office? We agreed that this is not a sustainable situation. The Trustees, the Supervisory Committee, and the Stewardship and Finance Committee will meet together to explore possible ways forward.

Our first night together we heard from three BYM Friends – Daquana Harrison, Ted Heck, and Zakee McGill - who shared their paths to activism in an open and vulnerable manner, which was very moving. They invited us to find our own paths. Chief Dennis "White Otter" Coker from the Lenape Indian Tribe of Delaware spoke to us on Wednesday evening. He opened with the Words Before all Words: The Thanksgiving Address. We were included as he asked us to say "and now are minds are one" after he mentioned each aspect of nature to be acknowledged and thanked. Chief Coker then spoke frequently about healing and honoring our Mother Earth every day. He also spoke about the excitement of reaching state recognition for the Lenapes, and the miracle that he is still on his homeland and practicing his culture.

The Thursday night intergenerational carnival was joyful and fun, as the children led their elders in play and lightness. This continued on Friday evening with the coffee house.

The Carey lecture completed our evening events. Francisco Burgos spoke on the topic "How does our faith respond to today's world?" He emphasized that love and justice are essential for our relationship to the divine, and our faith is a profound commitment to social justice. He also spoke about the importance of holding on to hope and caring for ourselves, so we can care for others, while we work on meaningful actions for transformation.