

**General Secretary's Report to
Baltimore Yearly Meeting Annual Sessions
30 July 2026**

Good morning, Friends. My name is Sarah Gillooly. My wife and I are members at Adelphi Friends Meeting, and I have been serving as your general secretary since summer of 2021.

I did something a little different this year. Usually I speak to you extemporaneously, but this year I wrote my report - which was more like writing a love letter.

First, I'd like to begin with some gratitude. Especially for Linda Coates, who returned to the Clerk Program Committee and is doing so very much more than anyone sees. Linda - Thank you. I continue to learn so much from you.

And to our staff team. Please stand up so we can recognize you. You heard directly from our camp staff today, but I also want to introduce Nikki Holland, Lucy Azenga, Andrei Israel, and Genevieve Legowski.

And truly - this is the best week of the year. I know I keep saying it, but that is not an empty platitude, Friends. This week is the Big Why I do this job. In all the day-to-day bureaucratic email work (how many of y'all remember a time before all jobs were email jobs?), it is you, this week, that is the culmination of a year's worth of our labors. Yes, the staff labors but also YOUR labors. Whether your work is shepherding our shared theology on the Faith & Practice Committee or planting seeds for next Annual Session on the Program Committee (or literally mucking out toilets on the Camp Property Committee), this week is the week we take a break and a breath and we sit down on the porch together and visit and look at the fruits of the Spirit among us. They are miraculously verdant on an otherwise burning planet. What a gift it is to have one another. Thank you for being here. Thank you for coming together - it is my favorite place to be.

I was really affected by the opening plenary address on Tuesday given by Evan Welkins from Friends World Committee for Consultation. Friend Evan speaks to my condition in many ways. And inspired by his call for more storytelling, I'm going to give my report to you this year in a few stories.

Unlike probably all other Friends, I spend most of my year thinking about our Annual Session theme. *Living in Harmony with the Earth and Each Other*. I've probably written it hundreds of times in assorted emails and documents since we gathered together last July. Though I found myself shortening it to just "Living Together." Harmony? That feels like a lofty aspiration in these times! We *know* we really really really need each other. Baltimore Yearly Meeting Quakers especially have been living this truth for 354 years. And yet. Living Together: It's Not Easy! I mean... let's talk about the Bible. 21 of the 27 books that make up the New Testament are direct instructions, guidance, and correction for the early church. In QuakerSpeak, 21 of 27 books of the New Testament are advises and queries for living together.

Part of Living Together is, unfortunately, hurting each other. We don't usually *intend* to do it, but we sure do. No matter how much we strive, living with each other means... well, being messy, flawed, real-life human beings who sometimes make mistakes or lash out from our own wounds or cannot (or will not) learn and grow and heal. We hurt each other. Sometimes we are wounded. And sometimes we are the one who does the wounding.

At our November Business Meeting this prior program year, I was the one who did the hurting. I got so frustrated and upset by the incredibly demanding circumstances of this job that my emotions overwhelmed me. It was one of those moments where my vision narrowed and all I could hear was the wooshing of my heart. I stopped listening. And I ran roughshod over a Friend of Color. An act of racial wounding.

I didn't intend it, but I sure did it. And I hated the way I felt after that meeting. In addition to taking steps to make direct amends, I spent the next few months digging into some of the unexpected emotional reactivity I felt that day in Business Meeting. And that is the next story I want to tell you. This is a content warning that what I am about to say acknowledges sexual violence among adults and sexual abuse of children without going into detail. If you'd like to turn off your camera or close your eyes or leave the room, I'm going to take a few slow breaths to give folks who need it, including myself, a little time to adjust. Okay... let's breathe together...

During my first year serving as your General Secretary, I was non-consensually, sexually touched under my clothing by a BYM Friend while I was visiting his local meeting. Friends, I believe, with complete conviction, that victims of sexual abuse get to decide when, where, and how their stories are told publicly. This is my story - but it is also part of our story. We hurt each other. We act from our wounds. Living Together is sometimes impossibly hard.

Tomorrow, the August issue of Friends Journal will feature a story about child sexual abuse that happened at a Quaker school in our region in the 1990s. I do not talk about the details of that case in large, public formats like the podium at Annual Session. Because I believe that victims, not bystanders and not journalists, get to decide when and where and how their stories are told. But what I DO want to talk about is the details of youth safety.

I want us to do everything in our power to keep young people safe. That means talking about sexual abuse and about consent and about speaking up for oneself and each other. We must nurture a culture that believes children and young people. If something is happening that doesn't feel right, please - talk to a trusted adult. To all Friends, if you see something that doesn't sit right, speak up. If you have any questions about the incident covered by Friends Journal or questions and concerns about BYM's Youth Safety Policy or implementing your Youth Safety Policy in your monthly meeting, please come see one of the Trustees or me or attend our Youth Safety Workshop this afternoon.

Living Together. It's not easy. But Living Together... it's also where we encounter grace. Our Friend Jim Fussell described his understanding of "grace" to me earlier this week as "finding joy

or gratitude in unexpected places or moments in life, especially when the situation makes that joy or gratitude surprising.” I really like that description and invite you to ask other Friends this week how they would describe their experience of grace.

The day I was inappropriately touched, a member of the Supervisory Committee happened to be in the room as a fellow member of that local meeting. She noticed me rush out of the room and found me in confusion and disbelief and tears in another room. The Supervisory Committee took action. The local meeting took action. My meeting and the BYM staff team - they cried with me, took work off my plate, and held me in their prayers. I dropped out of a semester at seminary, but that gave me time to get therapy. In the midst of all the confusing emotions I went through in the weeks and months after this happened, what felt crystal clear to me all along was this: I didn’t want all of you to know. I wasn’t ashamed. That wasn’t it. I knew I hadn’t done anything wrong. I certainly should not have been treated that way at my job or at a house of worship, let alone both. But I had some pain and anger to work out within my own heart, and I didn’t want to also do that in Quaker-public. But the grace I experienced from the members of the Supervisory Committee, from my Meeting, from the staff team - who believed me and took swift action and let me take the lead on what justice and healing looked like? They wrapped me in a kind of grace that took my breath away, Friends. Together is also how we see each other through.

Thank you for letting me tell you what happened to me. I needed to do that because I would like to continue to serve you for a few more years. I’m going to aim for 8, 3 more from now. And I couldn’t do so without releasing that to you. Let’s take a few more breaths together. Then I have one more story for you about Living Together...

[Places onto podium an old, worn zip lock bag full of 30 or so keys of different sizes]

During my first week on the job, back in 2021, Wayne Fingear, the outgoing Interim General Secretary, gave me the greatest inheritance of the General Secretary role: the BYM Bag of Key. Now, let me tell you about this bag of keys. A few of them are labeled - back closet, tan filing cabinet- do we even have a tan filing cabinet? But most of them are not labeled. A few of them are rusty, and I think there’s a bent one in there.

Don’t get me wrong - the BYM Bag of Keys has saved the day a few times! Andrei got locked out of his office during his first month on the job and, low and behold, we found an unlabeled spare in the Bag of Keys. And then, earlier this year, we found a key to a closet that nobody had opened since 2020! Also very helpful! But some of these keys probably go to stuff we don’t even own anymore - old cabinets, vehicles we sold a decade ago, a half-dozen unknown camp locks - the detritus of Living Together.

Over the last 5 years, I’ve come to see the Bag of Keys as a metaphor for some of the challenges we are having in Living Together as a Yearly Meeting. Our structures are kind of like the bag of keys. There is some really good and important stuff in there, but over the years we’ve started to build up what’s known as organizational debt.

Organizational debt is an organizational psychology term that comes from a concept in the tech sector. Technology debt is when coders encounter a problem and make a quick fix to keep the program running in the moment for its intended purpose. However, over time those “quick fixes” build up and can begin to degrade the functionality of the software. Organizational debt is similar. It’s all the compromises made “just to get things done.” It’s all the workarounds and quick fixes and reactions to one incident. It’s all the things we do for reasons nobody even remembers. The “interest” on that debt starts to accumulate as the world changes around the organization and comes in the form of reduced capacity, less flexibility, and lower and lower engagement. It’s one of those concepts that once you hear it you’re like, yep, I know exactly what that is. BYM has some organizational debt, and I’d like to get us on a payment plan.

Let me give you some evidence and examples of the organizational debt we are carrying around.

- How do people get onto the Supervisory Committee? We appoint a Naming Committee to constitute a Search Committee to nominate a Supervisory Committee that we then send to Interim Meeting for approval and then on to Annual Session for *further* approval.
- Our current committee structure requires 181 volunteers. By my calculations, many of our Yearly Meeting Committees exceed in size the average weekly attendance of about half of our monthly meetings.
- Each of our core governance committees - Trustees, Stewardship & Finance, and Supervisory Committee - are currently struggling to keep their membership numbers to the bare minimum, 4-5. We’ve had no clerk of Stewardship & Finance for a year. We have no Assistant Treasurer. And as you heard from the Nominating Committee the day before yesterday, they cannot fill committees.

Our house, Friends, is not in order. And it’s impacting our ability to do what we seek to do together. It’s okay - we don’t have to feel guilty or ashamed or hide from it. Houses are the places we live our big, incredible, loving lives inside, and they get messy. Who here has ever lived in a group house or knows what that is? DC and Baltimore are real Group House Towns. If you know anything about a group house, you know that sometimes about the clutter that accumulates in every cabinet and closet. You get frustrated and fed up about having no space in the kitchen one day only to clean out the cabinets and discover you have 3 panini presses left behind by various roommates over the years. Living Together: It’s messy!

I think that it is time for BYM to go through the kitchen cabinets of our group house, our bag of keys, and pay down our organizational debt. Because when we pay down the debts of the past, we can invest in the right now, the living body of Friends in front of us today and the many many MANY ways we are needed in the world right now. As we heard in yesterday’s plenary and see all around us this week, the world needs us. We need each other.

So with that, I wanted to hand out a preview of a proposal I hope to bring to the November 2027 Business Meeting. It’s a working draft. I’ve kicked the tires on it with a few Friends already. But I

welcome continued conversation in the next few months. The goal is to send something with the advance documents for November Business Meeting, which will go out in early October.

Thank you, Friends. It's the best week of the year, and I'm so glad to be together with you.