

EPISTLE 2020 - Northern Yearly Meeting

We are Quakers who love to be together in worship and work, who love to play and sing, old and young together. This is the 45th annual session of our Northern Yearly Meeting. Our gathering site is the Zoom virtual connection. Even as we long to physically be with each other, we rejoice to see all of the dear faces appearing on our screens. We slow down to hear our voices and our deepest yearnings. We acknowledged that we are meeting in the home lands of 16 nations south of Lake Superior, with reading of the names and music as well.

45 years ago, we were a brand new yearly meeting, who said, if there is work for us to do, we will go forward into it. This year, Friends, while moving into the new venue of online, maintained traditions of living experimentally and experientially. Our first Meeting for Worship was discernibly gathered. New life and leadings were supported in the context of Quaker discernment. Greatly expanded interest in the sister meeting relationship with El Salvador Yearly Meeting comes from both communities. We supported the leadings of 2 traveling ministers to visit El Salvador Yearly Meeting and their schools. The new experience of providing anchoring committees will support these friends and help them to prepare for this travel and ministry next year.

Clerking via Zoom became, of necessity, much more team work. We, the body, being clerked, learned to participate with the support of our amazing technical hosts, the personal use of colorful hand cards to assist unity and a glimpse into many windows of connections.

Workshops introduced experiences of Howard Thurman and earnest self-reflection on racism - self-examination leading to seeds of growth. Building bonds between our 30 monthly meetings in our yearly meeting was accomplished with focus on topics: First Day School in a pandemic, how welcoming our meeting places are, care of elders, inclusivity issues for virtual participation in Meetings' activities, and outward work based upon inner reflection. During every hour of our online presence with each other, becoming an anti-racist organization was lifted up via the query from our Worshipful Spirit- Led Anti-Racism Working Group.

Our corporate body united with a request from 2 of our Monthly Meetings for our Clerks to write a letter of concern to the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, to request adequate and appropriate support within the prisons for our religious meetings of worship to meet regularly there. One piece of our anti-racism focus during this session was to agree to change the status of our Worshipful Spirit-Led Anti-Racism Working Group from an ad hoc group to a standing committee.

In worship sharing, Friends decided to listen around the subject of overcoming racism with attention to discovering who is missing from our family circle of Friends, what we are holding back from our community, and taking away, and when we look with our "spiritual eyes" what do we see as our differences, among other queries. Sharing was rich, self-exploring and sometimes difficult to speak.

Friends' experience and experiment were furthered as our Plenary Speaker, Regina Renee Ward challenged the gathering to address, from the heart, several queries. Noting that Friends often have a hard time sitting with pain or uncomfortable feelings, but move too soon to joy and bless-

edness, Regina Renee challenged Friends to enter into non-intellectualizing self-examination. As Friends earnestly spoke from their own experience and understanding, fruitful insights were shared. The plenary continued with worship sharing around how Friends are living their Quaker values during Covid 19 and what might be done in the aftermath to form a more just and actively anti-racist community. Fittingly, the session ended with a showing of Zoe Mulford's "The President Sang Amazing Grace" with the Jeff Scher animation and the singing of Amazing Grace in the style of our Nightingales, our spontaneous singing group that arose decades ago from our yearly meeting. A closing video of Daniel Nahmod's "Planting Seeds" sent us homeward to nurture the seeds of this weekend.

The newness of gathering in worship and work via Zoom brought gifts of real focus for our work and helped us do some good things. Many people noted how easy it became to put names and faces together, when the various name tags we often used in the past were sometimes less than helpful or obscured. We understood that we were tightly scheduling the sessions, and this aspect was very helpful. We did keenly miss the many long-time attenders who are not using technology as a life-style choice, including the coordinator of our Simple Foods Program.. Our annual session feels incomplete somehow when none of us have been able to play together in all of the ways the days at Lions Camp offered.

Living experimentally together via these online annual Yearly Meeting sessions showed us that the Spirit's presence can be felt in this sort of gathering, though we dearly missed our physical presence with one another. As Sunday evening came to a close, we were invited to all unmute and greet each other. We did do that, and we were enthusiastic in our greetings. Greetings, alas, felt like only a good beginning. When all is said and done, Zoom can only begin to offer the opportunity for those deep on-going conversations and connection, as well as the joy of all ages being together for worship.