

# Epistle: Northern Yearly Meeting Annual Session

May 22-25, 2026

Amidst the forests, fields, and waters of central Wisconsin, U.S., 233 Friends from the monthly meetings and worship groups in Northern Yearly Meeting – along with our guests – gathered for four days of fellowship, spiritual deepening, and refreshment at the Lions Camp. Together, we sank deep into the theme of “Courage and Witness, Stronger Together.”

Our times require acts of courage, large and small, as we learned so acutely in our communities this past year. We know experientially how much stronger we are when we act together. Our plenary speakers on Saturday morning were PJ Hoffman of Twin Cities Friends Meeting and the new Twin Cities-based organization Quaker Direct Action, and Pamela Minden of Madison Friends Meeting, a member of a local Friends Committee on National Legislation advocacy group. They reminded us of the power of collective action, whether lobbying our government with FCNL or engaging in nonviolent direct action.

PJ talked about how social change movements – like any healthy ecosystem – need and have space for a diversity of skills and contributions. We all have a role to play. Pamela reminded us that the foundation for our work must be loving our neighbor, no exceptions: whether that be the person in our monthly meeting that irritates us, the person in the public square with whom we vehemently disagree, or our representatives in Washington.

In small worship-sharing groups we engaged daily with this year’s theme, getting to know each other more deeply. We wrestled with how we witness, find clearness, and find the courage to act in partnership – as well as discerning what needs to be done and what we feel called to do both individually and collectively.

Our vibrant Children and Youth Program, which included 57 children and youth and a score of adult leaders and helpers, also worked our theme into their activities. The pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and younger elementary age children each identified their Quaker superpower. We all took delight in the colorful capes they decorated, which they wore throughout the weekend. Older elementary children focused on collaboration, and enjoyed many outdoor activities, including seeing dragonflies emerging from their cocoons and learning about positive change. The middle schoolers focused on getting to know themselves, each other, and identifying as a group, which was exactly what they needed to do! Their many activities included visiting the mud pit, enjoying the ropes course, playing cards and gaga ball, playing with other age groups, and some random whimsical fun. The teens will speak for themselves in their Epistle.

Many other activities throughout the annual session drew on our theme. Friends gathered in a hybrid worship-sharing group titled “Spirit to Action: Caring for Our Immigrant Neighbors.” We shared many stories of our experiences in the resistance to Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Patrol. The telling of these stories reinforced how we can work fruitfully with other organizations, engage in nonviolent direct action, make connections with a diversity of people, and lean into discomfort.

Another interest group brainstormed possible community responses to the climate crisis. Emerging themes included changing our culture of individualism to more mutual care and community orientation and using a variety of creative tools to communicate our vision. Some of those tools were on display during our annual talent show, as Friends young and old shared skits, stories, and songs. We struggle to find the scale at which we can take meaningful action.

Friends were deeply moved by a visiting exhibit on the ongoing genocide in Gaza put together by Visualizing Palestine and cosponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. Photos, maps, and quotes from displaced and traumatized Palestinians from 1947 to the present brought home the suffering that the U.S. is complicit in. This traveling display is available for monthly and yearly meetings to show.

Annual session continued with our Fox Talks experiment. During each of these 45-minute sessions, representatives from a variety of local and national Quaker organizations share information and stories about their work and its impact. These well-attended sessions continue to deepen NYM's relationship with organizations and individuals in our wider community.

Our Anti-Racist Working Group sponsored a two-hour "Building the Beloved Community" session for families. We read stories and created art, including a large board, "La Comunidad Querida," where we drew self-portraits. We will send a photo of the finished board to our sister yearly meeting in El Salvador. Unfortunately, because of the current political situation in the United States, El Salvador Yearly Meeting did not feel safe to send representatives to our annual session this year. We mourned their absence.

As always, we were held and restored by the beautiful land we are guests on, at the intersection of lands stewarded by several Native American tribes, including the Dakota, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sac, and Fox peoples. We enjoyed hiking, boating, and swimming. Our migrating and nesting bird relatives provided joy and surprise.

Over time, we have spread our meetings for worship with attention to business into sessions that happen before annual session, including "deep dives" into our finances and proposed budget. During this annual session, we considered queries about how Spirit is leading us in our business meetings, and what discernment we must privilege for our precious time together. This led to several beautiful messages. A Friend expressed how our non-hierarchical decision-making process is deeply meaningful to them and ensures that everyone's voice is heard, even on the "boring" topics. Another Friend shared her realization that disunity and the Light can co-exist as we are being faithful. It is in wrestling with the hard things that the Light is likely to break through. She encouraged us to make sure we always have something difficult to wrestle with on our agenda.

Our collective response to this worship was well summarized by our clerk: "Wow."

Throughout annual session, we expressed an urgency for action. But the foundation for our action must be the quality of our relationships with each other and the Divine, and our attendance to those relationships, that will ground our action.

We hope that your yearly meeting is thriving and alive in the Spirit. We send our prayers and joys your way.