

## PEACE AND SOCIAL CONCERNS COMMITTEE (PSSC)

### Annual Report 2024

**Networking Day.** A principal PSSC project this year was Networking Day, held April 6 virtually. As in recent prior years, the PSSCs original idea--with planning which began prior to the outbreak of the Israel - Gaza War-- would have offered four separate workshops in person including

A-Quakers' discernment and actions towards racial justice and reparations;

B- Activism for peace and justice across generations;

C- How conditions in our prisons impact those beyond the walls;

D-Climate change: With elections and slow progress, how Friends can help move the needle in the right direction.

However, as the spring date for Networking Day approached, Friends perceived limited enthusiasm for these traditional topics and a shared great urgency among Friends from many Meetings who hoped to persuade U.S. leaders to act in opposition to the still unfolding tragic war in Gaza. PSSC Friends also agreed that a second urgent topic might involve support for the national Quaker Call to Action as to safeguarding the fall election that could be offered in future months.

After much discussion, PSSC Friends decided to change 2024's Networking Day to a virtual one that would attract the maximum number of Friends to hear about Kingian strategies of nonviolence generally and about the war in Gaza particularly. We also planned to offer an election-related virtual workshop in the fall. 40 attended the revised Networking Day. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Quaker activist and social justice facilitator Dwight Dunston presented the Kingian principles of non-violence, and Guilford College professor and Quaker Max Carter, who visits Palestine regularly, discussed the evolving situation and complexities in the region. Although not officially part of PSSC, several BYM Friends later also arranged a virtual meeting with staff members of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by one of Maryland's U.S. Senators, Ben Cardin.

**Ceasefire Minutes.** PSSC members felt the need to prepare a Minute urging an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the return of Israeli hostages and the release of Palestinians held without charge in Israel. After revisions and updating, Member Barbara Bezdek drafted two versions, one of greater length for Quakers, and a shorter version that Quakers could use with legislators and the media. Interim Meeting accepted the shorter version. Both versions are attached. The short version has been presented to both county and city government officials in Frederick as part of a request for a ceasefire resolution.

**Working Groups.** PSSC has three working groups under its care: Quaker Voice of Maryland (QVM), clerked by Molly Finch; Reproductive Justice Working Group (RJWG), co-clerked by Sharon Stout and Katherine Cole; and the Working Group on War and Militarism, co-clerked by Richard Capron and Stan Becker.

QVM is an all volunteer effort representing Quakers across Maryland, with a focus on legislation that Quakers across the state support. This year's legislative effort in the Maryland State Assembly urged support for climate justice, criminal justice reform, housing equity and water quality. Three of the six bills QVM supported passed this year.

The Ombudsman bill establishing oversight of prison conditions passed, which QVM supported with Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR). Clean Water Now bill brought back the citizen right to sue polluters that had been lost at the Federal level. QVM also supported the Renters Rights and Stabilization Act (HB693). Since it often takes at least three years for a good bill to pass in Maryland, QVM is thinking through how to support bills for a sufficiently long term. QVM has been considering how it can stay present with implementation of bills it helped pass.

RJWG, co-clerks Katherine Cole and Sharon Stout, met monthly over the last year. They prepared a minute for BYM on abortion and reproductive justice. (This was the first minute on the subject since 1979, when BYM approved three minutes). RJWG took a draft to the Fall Interim meeting for a first reading. Objections were raised so some revised wording included in the minute was brought to the March/Spring Interim meeting -- and after committee members communicated with all who had shared their concerns, the minute was again revised and brought to the June interim meeting when it was approved.

RJWG proposed a workshop for the Annual Meeting session. Four speakers will offer a hybrid workshop on abortion, reproductive justice, and the rapidly-evolving law in this area. RJWG is compiling a list of organizations that individuals and Monthly Meetings may support to help safeguard legal rights and help redress social and economic inequities in access to care. RJWG members have expressed their concerns in published Letters to the Editor (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, National Catholic Reporter, and Washington Post) and on social media.

The Working Group on War and Militarism met monthly from September through February. The group followed a "journal club" format on alternate months, and reported on actions and issues in the intervening months. Journal articles presenting various perspectives, mostly on the threat of nuclear war, gave the group material for reflection. After a summary presentation of the article, Friends were given the opportunity to speak from the silence, as led by the Spirit.

Reports on actions focused on the Back from the Brink Campaign and promoting the Treaty for the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Several members have been actively promoting these concerns. Time was also given to reflect on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and the urgency of finding non-violent ways to end these conflicts.

In March of 2024, due to a drop in attendance at monthly meetings, group members decided to pause meetings for six months and discern where Spirit may be leading their work.

The Peace and Social Concerns Committee welcomed **two new members** this year: Charlie Goedeke and Susan Williams.

Respectfully submitted,

Suzanne O'Hatnick and Annette Breiling, Co-clerks

Committee Members: Barbara Bezdek, Phil Caroom, Bob Rhudy, Richard Capron, Charles Goedeke, Susan Williams and Working Group clerks (and co-clerks), Sharon Stout, Molly Finch and Stan Becker.

## **Attachment A:**

### **Ceasefire Minutes - Calling for ceasefire, humanitarian aid and end to US arms to Israel for Gaza war. The shorter form was approved by Interim Meeting at a called meeting on April 20, 2024.**

#### **LONG VERSION**

As Quakers we believe in the sacred worth of each person and our historic Peace Testimony requires us to stand against violence in all its forms. We grieve for the loss of each life, and with those in Israel and Palestine who are losing loved ones. We pray with those waiting for the return of loved ones and those living under siege and bombardment. We condemn the killing of civilians by Hamas, and the massive retaliation by the Israeli Defense Force on Gaza.

We join with many millions across the world to call for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian access, an end to the catastrophic bombing of civilian Gaza, and action to take the steps necessary to create the conditions for a lasting peace.

We urge our government to halt the US enabling Israel's extraordinary violence against the people in Gaza, through the supply of weapons and by repeated vetoes of the UN calls for ceasefire. Our US participation not only escalates the build-up of hatred, it also escalates the potential for a wider war in the Middle East. We believe our government must call for an immediate ceasefire, immediate and adequate humanitarian aid, and immediate negotiations for a long-term peace. We insist that a ceasefire must be realized along with the return of all hostages and of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons on administrative detention.

We wish the U.S. had moved more quickly to support a strong UN resolution consistent with our concerns, and we recognize recent shifts in US approach: the Administration's decision allowing the March 25 resolution to pass, the executive order against violent Israeli West Bank settlers, pressing Israel to take energetic action against those settlers, directly increasing food and medical aid to Palestinian civilians, and efforts to persuade Israel not to undertake a major military action at Rafah. These are important steps to create the conditions for peace that lasts. Further military action will not bring peace. History shows us that retaliatory violence is a failure (witness the wars of retribution in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the long history of conflict that pre-dates the current war). Violence only begets more violence. There are no winners.

The Hamas attack on Israel on October 7 resulted in the death of over 1,300 Israelis, and Hamas took 240 civilian hostages into Gaza. The subsequent Israeli military attack on Gaza has killed more than 37,000 Palestinians as of this writing, primarily women and children. Even this count omits those maimed or remaining under rubble. The very numbers obscure the humanity of each life extinguished, the displacement of more than one million Palestinians in Gaza, the utter destruction of homes, hospitals, towns. Israel's ongoing siege blocks access to water, food, fuel, electricity, and medicine to all

people in Gaza. People are starving, thousands are injured, and most are ill due to the lack of drinkable water, adequate shelter and medicines. Overwhelmed medical facilities cannot help those in need. People are dying as a preventable humanitarian crisis deepens.

The many faith traditions represented in the region share a religious obligation to feed the hungry, care for the sick and wounded, and protect the most vulnerable from violence. This fundamental human obligation undergirds the moral authority of International Humanitarian Law. We urge the combatants, our government, and the entire international community to respect the 4th Geneva Convention for the Protection of Civilians in War.

We also call on all of us – from national and international leaders to religious bodies, media and people in their communities whether impacted or removed from this war -- to firmly disavow dehumanizing anti-Palestinian and anti-Semitic rhetoric and approaches that deepen painful divisions and politicize the current crisis. Our conviction that peace will prevail on earth, as the scriptures of the great religions of the world have promised, requires this of each of us, for humanity to regain its footing amid such incredible violence and suffering. This is a time for strong moral resolve, spiritual fortitude, and immediate action.

**SHORT VERSION – for letters to editors and similar public distribution**

(This version has been delivered to the Frederick County Council and the City of Frederick Board of Aldermen in support of a community request for a ceasefire resolution in Frederick.)

As Quakers we believe in the sacred worth of each person and our historic Peace Testimony prompts us to stand against violence in all its forms. We grieve for the loss of each life, and with those in Israel and Palestine who are losing loved ones. We pray with those waiting for the return of loved ones and those living under siege and bombardment.

We join with many millions across the world to call for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian access, an end to the catastrophic bombing of civilian Gaza, and action to create the conditions for a lasting peace.

Military action will not bring peace. History shows us that retaliatory violence is a failure (witness the wars of retribution in Iraq and Afghanistan). Violence only begets more violence. There are no winners and people are dying as a preventable humanitarian crisis deepens.

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## **Attachment B:**

### **Reproductive Justice BYM RJWG Minute on Reproductive Justice Approved by Working Group May 8, 2024**

Friends believe that God, or the Inner Light, dwells within each of us, and that by centering into stillness, we can individually and collectively listen to that inner voice and become clear about next steps to take. We support each person's right to seek and follow this inner voice and hold such leadings with loving concern for the individual. The decision to have, or not have, children is an intimate, personal one, to be held lovingly in the presence of the Inner light. Baltimore Yearly Meeting supports each person's right to choose, following the leadings of the Inner Light as they apply to their particular life situation.

Through our process of discernment, the Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends opposes laws that restrict access to contraception and abortion. We support the right of all persons to make decisions involving their own reproductive health. We believe in supporting those who make reproductive healthcare decisions that we might have made differently due to our own spiritual leadings, health and family circumstances. We respect those who hold religious views different from ours, and whose practice of religion differs from our own, as well as those who choose not to practice any religion and we oppose efforts to impose religious views on others.

We recognize that decisions regarding reproductive health are personal and may be difficult due to the person's life circumstances. These include decisions to prevent pregnancy, to become pregnant, to abort a pregnancy, or carry a pregnancy to term. We oppose those who spread false medical information regarding abortion and contraception.

We are aware that, in the United States, persons who are in the global majority are adversely affected more than others when laws are enacted that restrict access to contraception and abortion, and that they have higher rates of complications and death from pregnancy and delivery. We are conscious also of the appalling history of interference in these rights against people of color and other minorities . Our Testimony of Equality, and our leading to become an antiracist body urges us to address and heal these inequities.

We seek and advocate for a just society that allows access for all to the full range of reproductive healthcare, and for a society in which children are protected from abuse and oppression, and have adequate food, housing, healthcare and education.

## **Attachment C:**

### **Quaker Voice of Maryland Legislation Priorities for 2024 – End of Session Update**

#### **Summary:**

Out of the six chosen priority bills, each which had a cross-file (bill introduced in the House AND the Senate), three of our priorities passed during the 2024 General Assembly session.

#### **Criminal Justice**

##### **Office of the Attorney General – Correctional Ombudsman Unit (HB0297 / SB0134)**

Background: Creates the Office of the Corrections Ombudsman as an independent oversight mechanism of Maryland's correctional system. This office will have the authority to enter any facility at any time and talk to anyone as needed; authority that will promote positive change in corrections.

Outcome: Passed.

Implementation status: There is currently a job posting for the Office of the Correctional Ombudsman Director – Program Manager Senior position within the State of Maryland.

#### **Housing Equity**

##### **Renters' Rights and Stabilization Act of 2024 (HB693 / SB481)**

Background: Addresses the immediate needs of renters who are experiencing housing instability. This omnibus bill seeks to

- 1) establish an Office of Tenant Rights in the Department of Housing and Community Development responsible for providing renters with information about their rights under law and creating a tenant's bill of rights;
- 2) address the high eviction filing rate in the nation by increasing the eviction filing fee and preventing it from being passed on to renters;
- 3) reduce the allowable security deposit from two months rent to one month;
- 4) create a powerful new pathway to homeownership by creating a statewide right of first refusal, allowing renters the right to purchase their home if being sold;
- 5) modify the state's new rental voucher program to provide prioritization of vouchers for families with children under the age of five and for pregnant women.

This bill was part of the Governor's agenda.

Outcome: Passed

Implementation status: Not sure at this time, reached out to contact

#### **Water Quality**

##### **Clean Water Justice Act of 2024 (HB1101 / SB653)**

Background: Allows citizen suits to enforce Maryland's water protections, which were drastically reduced in Sackett v. EPA which impacted the reach of the federal Clean Water Act. Often community groups involved in these suits then have worked with the state to enforce the law, and these partnerships have been heralded by the Maryland



Department of the Environment and the AG's office as extremely valuable. This bill would allow these partnerships to continue in order to enforce Maryland's water protection provisions now that the Sackett decision has limited access to courts under the federal CWA.

Outcome: Passed

Implementation status: Not sure at this time, reached out to contact.

### **Clean Slate Act of 2024 (HB658 / SB602)**

Background: Allows individuals to have certain arrest or conviction records automatically cleared. These policies apply to people who have completed their sentences and remained crime-free the chance to move forward in their lives without the burden of a record. Automates the process for clearing eligible records to take the burden of removing the eligible offenses from the individual.

Outcome: Bill was never voted on out of committee.

Relevancy: Criminal record can be a barrier to jobs, housing, and other resources that people need to be a successful member of society.

### **Corrections – Segregated Housing – Limitations (HB1144 / SB1085)**

Background: Reduce the use of segregated housing (or solitary confinement) in state correctional facilities. Limited use to no longer than 15 consecutive days during a 60-day period and no more than 18 days total during a 60-day period. It would also require regular mental health assessments and out-of-cell time.

Outcome: Bill was never voted on out of committee.

Relevancy: According to the U.N. Special rapporteur on Torture, there should be an absolute ban on restrictive housing for more than 15 days. Longer than 15 days is considered torture. Quakers in Philadelphia were part of the creation of solitary confinement and should be actively dismantling this damaging and inhumane practice.

### **Climate Justice**

#### **Reclaim Renewable Energy Act of 2024 (HB166 / SB146)**

**Background: Purpose of the bill was to remove trash incineration from the Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS); this means it would no longer receive financial support from Maryland residents (a funding source contributed to through utility bills) as a renewable energy source.**

Outcome: Bill was never voted on out of committee.

Relevancy: This bill aligns with the Maryland's Climate Pollution Reduction Plan (p 21) recommendation to change the Renewable Portfolio Standard definition to remove solid waste (trash) incineration because of its negative impact on greenhouse gas emissions. By removing trash incineration, the state will be able to move toward its goal of state electricity consumption being 100% clean by 2035.