**EPISTLE**

To Friends Everywhere:

The Baltimore Yearly Meeting Women’s Retreat was gathered in joyful reunion on Saturday, October 21, 2023 at Friends Community School in College Park, MD on the theme of “Hope for an Inclusive Future.” Approximately 50 women attended in person and 8 attended via Zoom. Registrants came from 14 Friends Meetings and worship groups, representing Maryland, Virginia, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania. Friends arrived with bras and period products for donation to https://isupportthegirls.org

We convened in the multi-purpose room for chanting and songs, a longtime cherished tradition at our retreats. Transitioning into worship, a Friend opened with a brief reading about gathering in Meeting for Worship in a profound sense of gratitude, in expectant waiting, in deep listening to the Spirit that moves among us. We settled into worship together and were nourished by tender and heartfelt vocal ministry.

Prior to the plenary session, the welcome messages included a thank you to FCS for generously giving us the use of the school and welcoming with gratitude the helpful and very warm presence of FCS Director of Operations Van Nguyen and of Zoom/Computer coordinator Dema Al-Kakhan, both of whom were on-site throughout the day. We experienced a deeply meaningful plenary on the theme of inclusiveness with revelatory messages from Becca Bacon, Sarah Gillooly, and Daquanna Harrison, moderated by Chloe Schwenke.

After a lunch break, we used the school’s classrooms for workshops on the following topics: BYM and Reproductive Justice; Moving Into Ease; A Reflective and Interactive Experience; Turning Toward the Light on our Journey with Stewardship of the Earth; and Five Crowns, a card game. Following a break of snacks provided by participants, we broke into Worship Sharing Groups to consider these queries on inclusiveness:

1. What does exclusion feel like?
2. What is your hope for an inclusive future?
3. What can Quakers do to help create and sustain inclusion for you?

The afternoon Plenary Session focused largely on the future of the BYM Women’s Retreat and its format as a one-day event or a return to a weekend at a residential facility. One Friend spoke with deep feeling about the importance of the retreat, and its place in her life. The ongoing ripples from the disruption of the Covid pandemic are still felt. A Meeting did not step forward to take up leadership for the 2024 Women’s Retreat; though some individuals felt they would like to volunteer, they could not speak for their Meeting as a whole. Friends stayed in worshipful consideration of next steps during this difficult period of the discussion. In the end, three women expressed a desire to plan a January 2025 weekend retreat, *if* a minimum of six people step forward to form a planning group.

While setting up for the coffee house, we enjoyed the overabundance of snacks that had been brought and some also ate dinner from the catered lunch left-overs. A wonderful coffee house featuring poems, stories, and music was enjoyed. Many women stayed afterwards to fold up all the FCS tables, put away the chairs, clean up the catered food and take home bags of compostable material. We parted from each other with a sense of deep gratitude for our renewed connections, learnings and inspiration for the days ahead.

**BYM Women’s Retreat WG**