

Baltimore Yearly Meeting Annual Epistle August 6, 2023

To Friends Everywhere:

Nearly 200 Friends of all ages gathered for our Baltimore Yearly Meeting's 351st Annual Session at the Hood College campus in Frederick, Maryland and over 25 additional Friends participated on-line. Our theme was: *Building Our Community with Love and Tenderness*. Our opening retreat explored queries related to what binds us together. In building our communities, individuals are like irregular stones with many different shapes and sizes and sometimes jagged edges. For Friends, neither dogma nor hierarchy are the mortar to bind these stones together.

We were encouraged by BYM General Secretary, Sarah Gillooly, to pay attention to and be guided by what lights us up inside. In this spirit, BYM Friends were encouraged to share our passions, joys, and interests with one another as we entered into community and considered our future together.

We have difficult work to do. Sometimes we're successful. When we get it wrong or make mistakes, we must commit to correcting them together, not shouting across the quiet divide, but listening to each other and responding with kindness and appreciation for each other.

We celebrate the vigorous ministry of BYM camps which engages over 600 children each summer in the exploration of nature, worship, and spiritual community. Our STRIDE (Strengthening Transformative Relationships in Diverse Environments) program is successfully diversifying the composition of our staff and campers. This year we made a spirit-led decision to move one of our 4 camps, Opequon Quaker Camp, to the 1600 acre Rolling Ridge Conservancy with a 40-year lease, undertaking the financial and logistical complexities of moving the camp and opening it there in 2024.

BYM continues to strive to live into our commitment to be an anti-racist faith community. We have experienced strain as we embrace the intricacies of our complicity in systemic racism in our society. We seek to repair relationships with Friends who have been harmed by our actions, inactions, and words. We are starting to consider reparations, a concept many find uncomfortable. Meetings and individual Friends are encouraged to move beyond discomfort, to start conversations, to be creative and act. We envision becoming a hive coming together trying local reparations that can be a model for state and federal reparations. There is a clear desire to act and a rising urgency among us.

We approved a significant revision to BYM Faith and Practice covering topics central to our faith: *The Quaker Experience* and *Meeting for Worship*, the first such revision since 1988.

We heard reports from several BYM Friends who attended the Friends United Meeting Triennial in Kenya this Summer; including our General Secretary and Clerk. We were reminded that it has been 21 years since BYM faced the question of how to stay in relation to FUM despite profound concerns about personnel policies that restricted service opportunities on the basis of sexuality. The intervisitation program that we began at that time, to listen and connect with each other, continues to bear fruit.

Jared Wood, a father and Opequon Camp Director, shared inspiring and formative stories from his rich and diverse heritage during our opening plenary. He described the experience of being a Black father having to choose between survival and joy. He concluded saying that: "Liberation is continuing revelation within individuals, within families, and within communities, it is Redefinition." Rich sharing followed afterwards in response to two queries: What liberatory traditions can be gleaned from your

family story? When do you make decisions automatically that you don't feel good about, and where do those decisions come from?

We had a wonderful opportunity to participate in programmed worship with the Friends Church of Baltimore and joyfully experienced *A Taste of Africa*.

Diego Navarro delivered the Carey Lecture entitled: *Healing of Harm through Sacred Space and the Genius of Quakerism*. He left BYM and our constituent home Meetings with several challenges: (1) adopt a process for identifying and addressing harm; and (2) conduct an epigenetic historic accounting of BYM's complicity in slavery and associated businesses, and BYM's complicity in stealing indigenous lands and participation in the Indian boarding schools.

In our worship, business meetings, workshops, worship-sharing, Bible Study, meals together, and other activities this week, we've seen that of God in everyone — and renew our intention to welcome all newcomers as well as returning Friends, to go deeper together, and to let our Light shine in the world.

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.

~ Isaac Pennington