

**The Epistles Reported to Annual Session**  
**7 8mo. 2021**

To Friends Everywhere,

Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) started our 350th year together as we gathered in Spirit for annual sessions under the theme “Seeking Wholeness: Knowing Our Shadow and Our Light.” This was our second annual session held virtually under the threat of the ongoing global pandemic. However, in this year of our Jubilee, we gathered in celebration and we centered upon reflection, forgiveness, and justice. We seek courage and honesty to acknowledge the shadows of our history and our present and we embrace the Light that reveals not only our flaws but also our potential.

In our opening retreat with Lynn Domina, we reflected on the nature of forgiveness. We considered hurts that rest in the shadows and insights that lie beside them, and we were challenged to bring them all into the Light. We explored forgiveness and reconciliation in close personal relationships, then expanded our focus to consider cultural and national relationships. We were challenged to consider how faith-based organizations can bring about change and, finally, to identify one way in which we as individuals can intervene to bring about forgiveness, reconciliation, and change.

At our first plenary session, Lauren Brownlee shared the mantras of Love that guide her work as Upper School Head at Carolina Friends School. She presented a series of queries that urged us to hold ourselves accountable for our shadows, to learn from our mistakes, and to forgive ourselves and each other. She encouraged us to listen with love to that still, small voice within and to also make space for other important voices. Celebrating the benefits of diversity through which we learn from each other in a beloved community, Lauren challenged us to extend grace lavishly, recognize the Light in others, to believe that there is good in the world, and to lead first with love.

We began each Meeting for Worship for the Conduct of Business with an acknowledgement of the native peoples whose lands we occupy. Friends were encouraged to not only learn about these peoples but to act for the wholeness of indigenous people. The text of these land acknowledgements is attached. In our sessions, we found ourselves walking amidst our shadows as we labored toward wholeness. We grieved the disaffiliation of our Friends at West Branch Monthly Meeting. We grappled with the legacy of racism that still lives in us, and several items for business were left to season while we work to heal relationships and live into our anti-racism queries. We ached for Black and brown Friends, exhausted and alienated by our community. In these grueling times of pandemic and tumult, we struggle with our limited capacity to achieve the fullness of our vision. We felt encouraged by the many revisions to the marriage section of our Faith & Practice that reflect our practices today. Friends

expressed a desire to soon minute our affirmation of marriage equality for same-sex couples. Even when we struggled together, we marveled at the wonder of dappled sunlight in the forest - where light peeks through the shadows and our vision is transformed, allowing us to see the ferns and moss that thrive beneath the sun-seeking canopy. We felt gratitude for something deeper - a willingness for not knowing and a faith that we will find our way as, side-by-side, we put our hands to the plow of the continuous movement toward Truth.

On Thursday evening, we launched a year of activities commemorating the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the BYM and the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our camping program. We heard joy in music composed in honor of the occasion. We felt pride in historical accounts of the founding and development of the Meeting, the sorrow of conflict and schism, and the comfort of reunification and transformation. We listened to Friends whose lives have connected with grace to the Meeting in worship and service. In this joyful kickoff to our Jubilee year we remembered the past, celebrated the present, and embraced our work as we now seek to envision the future for both the Yearly Meeting and the BYM Camps.

We attended 25 workshops, with topics ranging from spiritual deepening and care of our Monthly Meetings to reparations and death and dying. Amidst the distance of large Zoom meetings, we found deep connections and powerful sharing in the smaller workshop gatherings. Connecting across local meetings to rejoice, think, learn, and grieve together was a highlight for Friends.

BYM invited Friends of Color everywhere to our Annual Session and to our BIPOC Hang-Out Space. BIPOC Friends from outside BYM blessed our Annual Session by broadening our conversations and transforming our experience of community. BYM Friends of Color particularly express gratitude for the BIPOC Hang-Out Space, which gave an opportunity for them to meet with Friends of Color from across the country for deep sharing and communion.

Throughout the week, we filled spaces for worship sharing, and Bible study, which we found especially helpful, and found ways to reflect and connect with Friends. Often, we were invited to linger after the completion of workshops to continue sharing time and ideas. Drop-in lunch, Intervisitation, and the BIPOC Hangout provided safe and inviting places to sit and share with others.

A small and joyful group of youth participants and adult volunteers met on three occasions for our Junior Yearly Meeting (JYM) activities. We played games, did “normal” things, and talked about our lives; there was community there. In our closing worship we shared queries and learned from each other, appreciating being in the present moment together. Young Friends (YFs) was delighted to hold a small in-person

conference (mostly outdoors and with masks) the weekend preceding most of the Annual Session events. Young Adult Friends (YAFs) were sparsely present this year at Annual Session, and it was a stretch to attend both BYM and YAF business meetings and find time for community; for many it was not possible. YAF has decided to move more important community decisions to a time other than Annual Session as much of their community engages in work with summer programs and is therefore unable to participate as thoroughly. They hope to see more of their community at the upcoming YAF Winter Conference.

We remembered 15 individuals in our Memorial Meeting who shared their lives in worship and support of monthly meetings as they followed individual paths of care of the community, care of others, peace and justice, education, and humanitarian services. We were grateful that Carol Monchik, Hugh Fuller, Nic Storey, Avtar Moore, Beth Garrettson, Virginia Schurman, Joshua Humphries, Denny Hartzell, Harry Massey, CJ Swet, Lee Lougée, Laurel Kassoff, Josie Shotts, Gladys Kamonya, and David Zarembka had lived among us.

At our closing plenary, Carey Lecturer Carl McGruder shared a wide-ranging message that began with acknowledging trauma and the need for healing before turning to the lessons of faith, hope, and love of 1 Corinthians 13:13. Carl observed that ours is a mystical faith available to all. However, seeing this mystical faith as perfect even as we live on land seized by the genocide of indigenous peoples and built our wealth through the enslavement of people of African descent is a primary error. Our culture has been built like a poorly constructed house, and there is no easy way to fix it. Carl urged us to hold up a mirror and see the embarrassment of our riches. He challenged us to wrestle with a society that is fading and dysfunctional to see that new things are possible. He encouraged us to decenter whiteness, to get out of our comfort zone so that we may rise out of the chaos to work towards truth, reconciliation, and restoration. We were reminded that even if love is perfect, living love is imperfect. We must, therefore, go forward to do our work with humility, sincerity, love, and courage.

As we sat in our closing worship reflecting on the events of the Annual Session and then spoke out of the silence to acknowledge both the richness of the experience of sharing time together and working together to achieve common goals, we acknowledged that there are concerns with which we must wrestle. Even in the joy and expectation of our Jubilee year celebration, we recognized that we must continue to seek clarity about what we are called to do and what we have the courage to do in our search for social justice.

As we enter this Jubilee of our 350th anniversary year, our attention will remain on our shadows and our light. In our Society devoted to Truth, we know our wholeness relies

on both. That wholeness arises from the courage to walk in the Light with care for our shadows. This Annual Session brought us together to rekindle our love for one another and the Spirit, giving us the nourishment to continue our journey.