

Minutes for Approval

Clerk's note: Because of the global COVID-19 pandemic, NEYM Annual Sessions in 2020 were held on-line. Zoom video-conferencing software was used to enable connections from Friends' households. While many Friends had used Zoom for committee meetings, and for Monthly Meeting worship and business during the months before Sessions, this annual session was our first experience with large-scale meetings by video conference.

Opening Celebration - Saturday morning August 1, 2020

1.1 Opening and Welcome

A slideshow of photos from meetings around New England was displayed as people entered our virtual space. Presiding clerk Bruce Neumann (Fresh Pond) welcomed everyone by singing "Row On." He then acknowledged the indigenous lands where NEYM member meetings are situated. Having displayed a map of traditional tribal lands, he asked us to enter into chat those lands on which each of us is currently located.

1.2 Introductions

The presiding clerk introduced members of the clerks' table, the tech team, and the pastoral care team.

- Recording clerks: Peter Bishop (Northampton), Marian Dalton (Brunswick)
- Reading clerks: Gina Nortonsmith (Northampton), John Humphries (Hartford)
- Tech team: David Coletta (Beacon Hill), Jennifer Swann, Kathy Malin (Smithfield), Elizabeth Hacala, Kathleen Wooten (Fresh Pond), Bob O'Connor (Vassalboro), Will Taber (Fresh Pond), Sara Hubner (Gonic), Brenda Nolan (West Falmouth), Jonah Sutton-Morse (Concord)
- Pastoral Care team: Abby Matchette (Burlington), Laura Hoskins (Putney), Caroline Stone (Wellesley), Elizabeth Szatkowski (Portland).
- The clerk also noted that as is our past practice, there are and will be a number of prayerful presences holding the body of the yearly meeting during times of worship and business. The following Friends acted as elders during the week:

Allison Randall (Keene), Janet Hough (Cobscook), Kathy Olsen (East Sandwich), Carl Williams (Plainfield), Minga Claggett-Borne (Cambridge), Fran Brokaw (Hanover), Joyce Gibson (Durham), Martha Sheldon (Durham), Marian Baker (Weare), Eleanor Godway (Hartford), Hugh MacArthur (Hanover)

The clerk reviewed basic Zoom practices for us to follow during the meeting and let us know how to contact someone for technical assistance.

1.3 Roll Call

Reading clerks called the roll of meetings by quarter, asking those from each meeting to unmute themselves and say hello as their meeting was called. (268 Zoom connections were logged in.) Despite this being an electronic process, attenders relished the opportunity to greet the gathered body.

1.4 Acknowledgements

The clerk acknowledged the work of the many people in a wide variety of capacities whose efforts contributed to making these sessions possible.

1.5 New Babies, First Time Attendees, and Visitors

We celebrated any new babies among us and welcomed first time attenders. Throughout the week the following visitors identified themselves and were welcomed.

Cherice Bock, North Valley Friends Church, Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting

Kirsten Bohl, North Carolina Yearly Meeting Conservative

S.Y. Bowland, Morningside Monthly Meeting, New York Yearly Meeting

Olivia Brangan, Wrightstown Meeting (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting)

Hilary Burgin, Quaker Voluntary Service

Dove John, North Valley Friends Church, Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting

Elaine Emily, Strawberry Creek Monthly Meeting, Pacific Yearly Meeting

Lilia Fick, Ottawa Monthly Meeting, Canada Yearly Meeting

Melanie Gifford, Adelphi Friends Meeting, Baltimore Yearly Meeting

Mary Kay Glazer, Greenville Friends Meeting, North Carolina Yearly Meeting Conservative

Karen Gonzalez, Iglesia Evangelica Amigos de EL Salvador

Jesse Grace, New Association of Friends, West Richmond (IN) Friends Meeting

Katie Green, Clearwater Monthly Meeting, Southeastern Yearly Meeting

Nancy Haines, Durham Friends Meeting, North Carolina Yearly Meeting Conservative

David Haines, Durham Friends Meeting, North Carolina Yearly Meeting Conservative

Mey Hasbrook, Kalamazoo Monthly Meeting, Lake Erie Yearly Meeting

McKenna Hayden, camper at Farm & Wilderness (Virginia)

Jennifer Higgins-Newman, Beacon Hill Monthly Meeting, Beacon Hill Friends House

Faith Josephs, (Charlotte Friends Meeting, Piedmont Friends Yearly Meeting, Associate Sec'y for Development , FGC

Sarah Kennedy, Friends Committee on National Legislation

Allison Kirkegaard, Pacific Yearly Meeting

Nils Klinkenberg, Beacon Hill Friends House

Eric Kristensen, Vancouver Monthly Meeting, Canadian Yearly Meeting

Ramon Longoria, Gibara Monthly Meeting, Cuba Yearly Meeting

Laura MacNorlin, Atlanta Friends Meeting, (SAYMA)

Amanda Mayer, Friends Meeting of Washington, Baltimore Yearly Meeting

Robin Mohr, Secretary of the Section of Americas, FWCC

Judith M'maiti Nandikove, Danholm Monthly Meeting, Nairobi Yearly Meeting

Lisa Parker, Medford, MA

Yadira Cruz Pena; Pastor, Velasco Monthly Meeting, Cuba Yearly Meeting

Julie Peyton, West Hills Friends, Sierra Cascades Yearly Meeting

Anne Pomeroy, New Paltz Monthly Meeting, New York Yearly Meeting

Noel Potter, York Springs, PA, Agnostic/Episcopalian community

Cai Quirk, Ithaca Monthly Meeting, New York Yearly Meeting

Diane Randall, Friends Committee on National Legislation

Karen Reixach, New York Yearly Meeting

Tom Roberts, Noblesville Monthly Meeting, Western Yearly Meeting

Gale Schultz, East African Women's Ministry, USA Support Group

Jacqueline Stillwell, Mondanock, Right Sharing of World Resources

Gloria Thompson, Northeast coordinator, FWCC

Steven Willett, Manchester & Warrington Area Meeting, Britain Yearly Meeting

Pamela Williams, Germantown Monthly Meeting, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

Liz Yeats, Friends Meeting of Austin, South Central Yearly Meeting

1.6 Clerks' Introduction to the week

The presiding clerk noted that in keeping with our ongoing connection with Cuba Yearly Meeting, we will have three visitors from Cuba with us during the course of the week: Ramon Gonzalez Longoria from Gibara MM, Yadira Cruz Pena, pastor of Velasco MM and Elsa de los Reyes Alvarez, secretary of Vista Alegre MM. The clerk acknowledged the effect of the pandemic on us, and the grief for lost opportunities and old norms. This week, through the voices we hear and the work that we do, he suggests we move from grief to engagement with establishing new norms, where each of God's children is loved and respected and treated with dignity. He invited us to bring our full selves to this work. We have turned over our usual business meetings to an exploration of how we are led to join a rising tide of intolerance for racial injustice. We are all challenged to create the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Sessions Committee clerk and clerk of the online Sessions planning team Rebecca Leuchak (Providence) welcomed us to the 2020 NEYM Sessions, with an especially warm welcome to newcomers and those who are juggling everyday responsibilities and joining us as able and to long time attenders. We feel joy and sorrow and we will mourn the loss of some wonderful traditions here at Sessions, but together we will strengthen our bonds.

Youth and youth staff were sent off to their own adventures to a rendition of *Row On* sung by Rebecca Leuchak and Bill Monroe (Providence).

1.7 Reflections from the Yearly Meeting Secretary

After two songs by Eden and Jim Grace (Beacon Hill), we settled into worship. Out of the silence Yearly Meeting Secretary Noah Merrill invited us to transformation.

“There is only one meeting for worship,” he said, “and we gather there in eternity. It is available to all who open their hearts, we emerge from it at birth and return to it in death, and across the miles we are participating in it now.”

The early Quakers discovered something hidden in plain sight--a world-transforming power waiting within every heart. As they yielded to it, they were transformed, becoming clearer channels of love and Truth. They spoke of three movements within this transformation, which in the language of their time they called conviction, convincement, and conversion. Today we may call them revealing, surrender, and turning.

Some Friends may experience the moment of revealing as being shown the impact of our own choices, or of how we participate in oppression. Others may find themselves brought to a renewed assurance of how we and each of our fellow beings are infinitely beloved.

Surrender, for Quakers, means giving over, not giving up. We let go of trying to save the world through our own action, and instead learn to participate in the healing of creation which is already underway.

Turning means putting into practice the invitation to love again and again in our lives. Only we can choose to be faithful, but in these moments we may encourage and strengthen one another.

Supporting one another in revealing, surrender, and turning is the essential purpose of the Quaker movement. It is the purpose for which NEYM was gathered 360 years ago and it is the purpose for which we gather now. “We come here with many different conditions, hopes, and burdens. I cannot speak to all conditions but there is a Spirit who can, and this is the Spirit who welcomes you here today.”

1.8 Closing

Rebecca Leuchak completed our morning with a quote from our own epistle of 2019 which read “There is a tide in the affairs of men / which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.” She noted how this quote leads us directly into this year’s theme in relation to the work ahead of us. She outlined the schedule for the week, which includes a tightly focused meeting for business, and she encouraged us to take the Wednesday Sabbath as a time to step away from the affairs of the world.

Kristina Keefe-Perry (Fresh Pond) read a poem to lead us into a brief closing worship.

Saturday afternoon August 1, 2020

2.1 Opening Worship

From out of the silence, we heard the June 2019 epistle from Great Plains Yearly Meeting in Wichita, Kansas. They reported that after 30 years of discernment they adopted a “statement of inclusion” recognizing that “God calls us to love one another as God loves us” and affirming that “all people are invited to fully participate in the life of the yearly meeting.” The keynote speaker at their gathering, John Calvi (Putney, NEYM), spoke of Friends' call to service in the world and counseled “we want to be doing our best, not our most.”

2.2 Welcome to Business Sessions

The presiding clerk welcomed us and thanked everyone for coming. As we are meeting virtually for the first time, he asked the reading clerks to guide us through good Zoom disciplines designed to facilitate our virtual conversations. He noted that business is likely to move more slowly than usual, as we are unfamiliar with this setting. Please be forgiving of each other, and remember that even though we are at home, we are in holy space for the duration of Sessions.

2.3 Noticing Patterns of Oppression and Faithfulness

Polly Atwood (Cambridge) introduced the work of this group. She began by introducing the other members of the group: LJ Boswell (Cambridge), Melody Brazo (Fresh Pond), Melissa Foster (Framingham), Lisa Graustein (Beacon Hill), Becky Jones (Northampton), Anna Lindo (Framingham), Richard Lindo (Framingham), Heidi Nortonsmith (Northampton), L V M Shelton (Plainfield), Pamela Terrien (Westport), Maille Wooten (Fresh Pond), and Zenaida Peterson (Cambridge). The group lifts up the deep faithfulness of those who are here today. They seek to do their work from Spirit, in love, with honesty and compassion.

The group invited Friends to stay connected to feelings and thoughts that arise, to resist reacting out of that place and to embrace this learning. Even when it is uncomfortable at times, this work will strengthen NEYM as a beloved community. The group offered sentence stems—*I hear, I see, I feel, I know* (in deep heart sense, not just head), and *I wonder*—as a beginning for this work. All Friends were invited

to share what they are hearing, seeing, feeling, knowing and wondering, as well as questions, via a dedicated email address. The working group will distill themes and report these back to the body as a whole.

2.4 Epistle from the FGC Pre-Gathering of People of Color

The clerk asked LVM Shelton (Plainfield) to read the Epistle from the June 2020 FGC Pre-Gathering of People of Color.

This was the eighth year that Friends of Color and their families met for a Pre-Gathering Retreat before the Friends General Conference gathering. This year's retreat was held virtually. The importance of this Gathering for Friends of Color cannot be overstated. Friends of Color can't breathe in the wider Quaker world, and the weekend presented a rare opportunity for not being othered In Quaker space.

In isolation due to COVID-19, Friends of Color have been kept apart from trusted loved ones and the pre-gathering retreat brought back the source of community and family that has been missing. The Pre-Gathering Friends of Color Retreat provided a much-needed reprieve from the systemic racism too often found in our American Quaker community that often goes unseen by many white Friends.

Friends of Color ask all Quakers to heed a Call to Action and to sit with a list of queries. To the list of queries from the epistle, LVM herself added the following queries:

Where and how do you find *yourself in* those you have othered, marginalized, or erased?

Where and how do you find those you have othered, marginalized, or erased *in yourself*?

“For People of Color,” she said, “the human-made pandemic of racism is deadlier than COVID19, and we need you to do work so that we can *breathe*.”

Friends then went into Zoom breakout rooms for worship sharing around the queries.

(See the letter and the queries on page ___)

2.5 Voices of those answering God's call

Throughout the week we heard from Friends involved in justice work in response to spiritual leadings. Their presentations invited us to listen more to our own sense of God's leading. Many of these Friends shared resources.

The clerk introduced Zenaida Peterson (Cambridge). Zenaida spoke about their justice work as recruitment coordinator for Quaker Voluntary Service (QVS), with Boston Community Wellness, and with the Feminine Empowerment Movement (FEM). Their mutual aid work involves helping people find resources like food, diapers, and masks, as well as disseminating information to help people prepare for participation in uprisings. Slam poetry has also been part of their artistic and emotional support to the community.

2.6 Noticing Patterns

The following were patterns lifted up today by attenders at Sessions:

- When the message regarding native lands was delivered, it assumed all of us were white/European.
- When people share their pronouns, it may be helpful to enter all of the forms including the possessive, since there are some designations unfamiliar to many of us.
- It is easy to use the word "should," but that word brings a sense of judging, whereas saying "I encourage" invites exploration.
- The time we were given for digging into the queries was appreciated, but dealing with these queries is lifelong work, and we are encouraged not to feel limited to the time we had.
- The clerk was noticed for the gracefulness with which he owned "mistakes" that were noticed in sessions.
- All those serving on the Pastoral Care team are white women; there may be people who don't feel that group reflects their needs.
- We keep using the term "mistake;" what is needed is to relearn patterns.
- But we also need to not only change our use of words, but change our actions.

Tuesday morning August 4, 2020

3.1 Opening Worship

Out of the opening silence the November 2019 epistle from Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting, in Ghent, Belgium was read. The chosen themes of their Yearly Meeting were “Living adventurously” and “Trusting the Light in our daily lives”.

“We need to learn to be brave, to take our Quakerism out to the wider world trusting we can come back to the Quaker community for replenishment.

“We should remember that being led by the Light may not feel comfortable. What is important is the path, and to always remember that we ourselves might be mistaken, for example in the failure of Friends to adequately address issues such as gender, racial and sexual orientation equality. Things start to change with that discomfort; we grow to no longer be the person we were before the change began.”

3.2 Noticings

LJ Boswell and Melissa Foster of the Noticing Patterns of Oppression and Faithfulness working group shared patterns of oppression and of faithfulness that have been seen in our work this week. Friends’ language has continued to center whiteness; we find that we speak with a sense of urgency to be heard and understood that is characteristic of the dominant culture; we often use “we” and “us” as if all of us shared the same experiences. Also noticed were ways we have been faithful in our efforts to break this pattern. Our clerk modeled a willingness to experiment with different language and to ask for help with that, and members of the dominant culture were seen to step back so that others could be heard.

Perfectionism is part of the culture of oppression, and we have shown our perfectionism in some of the ways we call out patterns we notice, shaming one another for our mistakes. Melissa reminded us of something LVM Shelton said: “I hope I can be glad of each mistake I make: it is a lesson to be learned. It keeps me green and growing. When I stop making mistakes, I have stopped practicing. I am in ashes and the winds will blow me away into nothingness.”

3.3 State of Society Report

LVM Shelton (Plainfield), Susan Vargo (Northampton), and Richard Lindo (Framingham), members of Ministry & Counsel, presented a State of Society report for the Yearly Meeting.

The Yearly Meeting received State of Society reports from monthly meetings early this year. Most of them were written in the pre-COVID days and all were written before the release of widely seen and distressing video showing the May 25th murder by police in Minneapolis, MN, of George Floyd, a Black man. The Friends preparing NEYM's State of Society report felt called to focus on what is in our hearts now more than on synthesizing reports from monthly meetings. Because of the pandemic, the report presented to Sessions has not yet been approved by Ministry & Council.

The committee told us "The reports received from monthly meetings only hint at the wounding many Quakers, of various abilities, genders, ethnicities, affectional preferences, and social classes feel, enthralled as we are by our culture of control and domination, which we have learned to call Empire.

"The Empire we are immersed in is a culture where the few have power over the many. In spite of Quaker values and the most righteous of intentions, Empire is manifest within almost all of us...

"To change the world, we of NEYM must also transform ourselves. Those of us who are Euro-Americans, must let die that white privilege and power that adds to the armor around our hearts. Those of us who are people of color must let go the armor of victimhood that surrounds many of our hearts.

"If we are to transform ourselves and the world, we must be ready to say 'Here I am' when leadings of spirit come to us. If we accept the challenge and enter the chrysalis state, if we cast off the clothing of Empire, we become willing to let go of whatever does not serve the butterflies we are to become."

Friends received this report and discussed queries presented for individual transformation in breakout rooms.

(See the report and the queries on page ____)

3.4 Reparations Working Group: *NEYM Letter of Apology to Native Americans*

Leslie Manning (Durham), clerk of Permanent Board introduced the documents coming before us from the Reparations Working Group: a letter of apology to the indigenous peoples of our geographic area, and a call to action which is intended to serve as a starting point for monthly meetings' consideration. Friends were asked to approve forwarding the *NEYM Letter of Apology to Native Americans* to monthly meetings for seasoning over the coming year, so that it can come back to Sessions next year for further consideration.

To help center us before our work, we heard a video by Hawk Henries, a flute player from the Nipmuck tribe. Leslie reviewed the history of the Reparations Working Group, which was formed in 2019 after we repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery during our 2013 annual sessions [2013-52]. The working group is composed of Leslie Manning, Erica Adams (W. Falmouth Preparative), Maggie Edmondson (Winthrop), Charles Simpson (Burlington), and Suzannah Schell (Beacon Hill).

Leslie then read a text from Sheri Mitchell of the Penobscot tribe: "Walking a spiritual path does not equate to perfectionism. It requires a willingness to deeply accept the imperfections within yourself and others and find the beauty in them. It also means being accountable for your words and actions and developing a healthy and balanced response-ability when you are wrong or when you cause harm."

In listening to native Americans, what the working group has heard is, "Tell your people we are still here. Tell your people we need to heal. We must concentrate on our people, reclaiming our culture and language, saving our youth, healing the planet. We have no reason to trust, but some of us are willing. How can we re-concile when there has never been conciliation?" We have been asked for an apology. This work is not finished and may never be finished.

Suzanna Schell (Beacon Hill) read the draft apology and asked us to sit with it in silence. (See the letter of apology on page ____)

After thoughtful reflection and appreciation, Friends approved forwarding the letter of apology to monthly meetings, along with materials to support the discernment process. Contact information will be provided where Friends may share information and suggestions. The clerk postponed consideration of *A Call For Us to Act* until the next business session.

Thursday morning August 6, 2020

4.1 Opening Worship

From out of the silence, the reading clerk read a reflection from Ian Harrington (Cambridge) reminding us that 75 years ago today the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan and three days later another bomb on Nagasaki, Japan. “On this 75th anniversary of such disaster and destruction, let us hold in the Light those who bore the impact of that long ago explosion and those who, over the past 75 years and in the future, are dedicating their lives to preventing any more cataclysmic explosions.”

4.2 Change to process for approving minutes for this sessions

Recognizing our limited time for conducting business during these virtual Sessions, the clerk asked for permission to forward to Permanent Board for approval those minutes that do not reflect decisions by the body, but rather are summaries of reports received. Friends approved.

4.3 Finance Committee: Budget

Bob Murray (Beacon Hill), clerk of the Finance Committee, reported on changes to this year’s budget process. Consideration of the budget for fiscal year 2020-21 is being postponed this year until the Permanent Board meeting on September 19. The budget, along with explanatory text, is in the advance documents. The listening session around the budget that is usually held at Sessions will be held on Zoom on Saturday, August 29, at 10 a.m. Any interested Friends are invited to participate. As Bob has been approved as the new NEYM treasurer, Scot Drysdale, the incoming clerk of finance, will host that session.

4.4 Voices of those answering God's call

Continuing to hear from some Yearly Meeting members active in justice work we heard from the following people:

Diane Randall (Hartford), General Secretary of FCNL

After encouraging robust participation in the election process, Diane outlined three areas of federal advocacy FCNL is focusing on right now.

1) The Justice in Policing Act: FCNL's focus has been on the section addressing the militarization of the police. This legislation won't solve all policing issues by itself. We need coordinating efforts at the local level.

2) The most recent COVID relief bill: The impact of the pandemic in terms of economic fallout will last long past the development of a vaccine. This bill proposes increases to SNAP and the extension of unemployment benefits.

3) Native American work: FCNL has a full time Native American congressional advocate working on issues relating to missing and murdered native women and tribal justice with the Violence Against Women Act.

Diane emphasized the effectiveness of forming contacts and relationships with our congresspeople.

At the end of Diane's presentation, the clerk shared that he hears a longing among some Friends for a focused piece of work for the Yearly Meeting as a whole to take up. He noted that while such an effort has not emerged, FCNL provides many opportunities for individual justice work.

Lori Martin (New Haven), Coordinator of Haven's Harvest

Lori shared that this ministry began when she encouraged her son, home from college, to get involved in something meaningful. As her son engaged in this work, Lori felt Spirit drawing her into it as well.

Haven's Harvest is a local nonprofit that recovers surplus food from area businesses and transfers it to nonprofits that can store and distribute it to those in need. Communities experiencing food insecurity are often Black and brown due to systemic racism and policies around immigration.

Part of Haven's Harvest work is advocacy for policies that reduce the need for this type of service. The work is friendly and neighborly--not charity work, but rather

solidarity. “We all work together. We recover food, but we also create relationships. We are able to connect people with each other.”

4.5 Reparations Working Group: *A Call for Us to Act*

Maggie Edmondson (Winthrop) spoke about the work of decolonizing faith, and decolonizing Quakers in particular. Working toward right relationship with Native Americans is one aspect of work around the racism, domination, exploitation, superiority, and individualism that fosters disconnection from one another and the earth. Knowledge of this continent’s history through lenses other than that of the settlers is important. Churches must look at how they have benefited from colonialism. We must examine structures of communities of faith to see how they continue oppression.

After a conference at Pendle Hill, Maggie had a leading to create a new Quaker organization, Decolonizing Quakers, that would connect Friends in whom this concern is alive. (decolonizingquakers.org) Its website has resources for nonindigenous Friends as we work for change.

The clerk then introduced *A Call for Us to Act*, produced by the Reparations Working Group as a companion document to the *NEYM Apology to Native Americans*, noting that it is meant to suggest tools which the monthly meetings could use to engage with the reparations concern. The list of actions is neither a list of things meetings *should* do, nor a requirement - simply a beginning resource to help us educate ourselves. Charles Simpson (Burlington) read *A Call for Us to Act* for the Reparations Working Group. (See the [Call for us to Act on page ___](#))

Friends expressed overall support for *A Call for Us to Act*, but several concerns were expressed.

A Friend pointed out that the recommendations in the document do not mention looking at the history of the land owned by the Yearly Meeting itself. This Friend also questioned the appropriateness of using Legacy Gift funds to investigate reparations, when these funds may derive in part from stolen land.

Another pointed out that issues involving Native Americans are confusing to white people. She also asked, is it contrary to Quaker testimonies to support the

sovereignty of Native Americans over their lands if they use those lands to build gambling casinos?

A Friend expressed concern that European Americans can be too quick in rushing to make things happen, and there should be an added note of humility. Perhaps instead of *A Call for Us to Act*, it should be called *A Call to Faithful Response*.

A number of voices highlighted that we are in many different stages of our work in understanding our history and current relationships with native peoples. While one Friend believed that establishing relationships with native people should happen before placing a plaque in their meeting house, another cautioned that we must approach Native peoples in humility, recognizing that we cannot expect that Native peoples will accept our overtures.

One Friend, identifying herself as mixed blood Cherokee/Irish, applauded the effort to move forward in our imperfections, as Sherri Mitchell said.

Sensing general approval, the clerk suggested that we allow the reparations working group to edit the “Call to action” based on the comments heard in this meeting, and forward that document, together with the letter of apology, to Monthly Meetings for engagement with the concern. A number of friends expressed discomfort with that path. Seeing many hands still raised, and recognizing that we had already gone well over our allotted time, the clerk named that we did not have unity, and closed the meeting.

Friday morning August 7, 2020

5.1 Opening Worship

Meeting was opened by a reading of the October 2019 epistle from France Yearly Meeting. Their theme was “the Quaker method in support of action.”

“We continued further to question not only our witness but our methods: the means we use to discern ‘what love demands of us,’ and how that translates into action. We heard many stories of Quaker activity, and remembered how an action in the name of our society starts as a ‘concern’ from a member or small group, and not from an institutional decision.

“We were reminded in various ways that in fact our greatest witness is always our own lives. We shared how the Quaker ‘method’ leads to a style and a discipline in our behaviour, both in daily life and in our Meeting. Despite sometimes questioning the number of working groups and committees, and being sometimes frustrated by the slowness of the method, we know how this leads to unity and dedication.”

5.2 Opening Prayer

The clerk opened today’s session with a prayer:

Dear God, you have brought us together.

Please help us to hear what it is you would have us do.

5.3 Video greetings from our Cuban friends

Yadira Cruz Peña, pastor of Velasco Monthly Meeting, Cuba Yearly Meeting, greeted us with a song sung by the women’s group of Velasco.

*There are moments that words cannot reach to tell you how I feel,
for you my good Lord;*

*I thank you for everything you've done,
for everything you do and for all that you will do.*

5.4 Clerk’s reflection on Thursday’s business meeting

The Presiding Clerk shared some reflections on our difficulty in finding unity to approve the “Call to action” associated with the Letter of Apology to Native Americans. He sensed that there were multiple factors contributing to the dis-ease the body experienced. These included a fear of the unknown as we enter into this work; discomfort, for those of us who identify as white, with the deeds of our spiritual forebears; and an underlying emotional charge from the Pandemic.

Adding to the complexity of the situation is our longing to *do something*, balanced by voices naming the need to be respectful and humble in our relationships with Native peoples.

The clerk further shared his thoughts about how much we Quakers are influenced by the wider society. One way that plays out is an attachment to outcome, “and that played out in myself yesterday. Part of my frustration at the end of yesterday’s meeting was that I had an attachment to an outcome that wasn’t happening. I acknowledge and apologize for that.”

5.5 Noticing Patterns

Polly Atwood and Anna Lindo of the Noticing Patterns of Oppression and Faithfulness Working Group brought to us reflections that have come from the whole body. The Noticing Patterns email box received many noticings both of faithfulness and oppression. We sense a growing trust and willingness to engage with this work. Friends are taking risks.

Concerning Thursday’s business meeting: We followed patterns of faithfulness. We laid aside old things to make space for Spirit, agreeing, for instance, to let Permanent Board approve minutes that do not involve decisions of the body. We listened deeply to Friends who spoke of their ministries in various contexts. With joy and ease, we approved forwarding the *NEYM Letter of Apology to Native Americans* to monthly meetings.

There were also times when, having been stretched into this faithfulness, we felt the temptation to contract back into what felt safe--to slide back into patterns of oppression. We found ourselves overly engaged with words and details, not listening to Spirit moving among us. At times these patterns hindered the process of discernment.

Empire within us takes the form of us not listening, seeking control, forgetting our trust in each other and in our committees, prioritizing our own individual voices over the voices of others, speaking without fully attending to what has already been said, assuming an apology is a single act or letter, weaponizing a need to reach consensus, and feeling the tyranny of time rather than surrendering to God’s time.

QUERIES From the Noticing Patterns of Oppression and Faithfulness Working Group:

What are you noticing in yourself during Business, or maybe in other parts of Sessions? We invite you to use the sentence stems to practice noticing what's coming up for you: I feel.... I see ... I hear ... I know (in heart/body, not just head) I wonder

When do you notice -- in your body, feelings, thoughts -- a temptation to react, to resist, or to stop listening to others and Spirit?

What do you fear will happen if some business item, or aspect of an item, is not done just so?

When do you feel yourself listening deeply? What do you notice when you are in that place? What supports you to stay with that deeper listening?

Can those gathered in Meeting for Business trust that discernment will come in the time it takes, and that whatever gets done, gets done?

5.6 Voices of those answering God's call

We have been referring to these presentations as the voices of people doing Justice work, but really they are an invitation to see the myriad of ways that people hear God's call.

Emma Turcotte (Beacon Hill) - 2018-19 QVS Fellow

"Since Covid started, I began thinking about how to continue antiracism work. After George Floyd's murder I started a Facebook group for Earlham alumni POC, since my introduction to activism began at Earlham and I wanted to recreate virtually the community I had at Earlham where students of color could have a space to advocate and stand in solidarity with one another. I also started Abolition Journals' free six-week study guide titled "If You're New To Abolition" and began a free online course offered by Yale: *African American History from Emancipation to the Present*. Both of these are excellent resources and both are things that I am doing with friends in order to hold myself accountable to doing this work."

“In addition, I read and downloaded from the web many articles to share with friends and family. I watch documentaries , which several sites have been showing for free lately. I started buying directly from black-owned businesses, and found the only black-owned bookstore in Boston (Frugal Bookstore, frugalbookstore.net). I am more intentional now about where my money goes and believe that the most radical thing you can do today is buy a book by a black author about the black experience from a black owned bookstore.”

Emma included in the chat a link to an extensive list of racial justice resources she thought others might find helpful.

5.7 Earthcare Ministry and the Racial, Social and Economic Justice Committee: *Call to Urgent, Loving Action for Earth and Her Inhabitants*

Steve Gates and Gail Melix, who identified herself as a Wampanoag Quaker, co-clerks of Earthcare Ministry, along with Beth Morrill, clerk of Racial, Social, and Economic Justice, and other members of the committees read their *Call to Urgent, Loving Action for The Earth and Her Inhabitants* in a video presentation.

The call asks, “At this critical time, the Earthcare Ministry and the Racial, Social and Economic Justice Committees invite Friends to a year of spiritual and intellectual discernment regarding social injustice, including racism and the plight of Mother Earth.” The Call asks monthly meetings to discern actions that can be taken at the monthly meeting and yearly meeting levels.

See the “[Call to Urgent, Loving Action for Earth and Her inhabitants on p. __](#)”

Friends approved sending the Call to monthly meetings, affirming that there is power in this message.

Saturday morning August 8, 2020

6.1 Opening Worship

From out of the silence we heard a portion of the 2019 epistle from Alaska Friends Conference in Wasilla, Alaska. “Love, Joy, and Empowerment” was their

theme, formulated in response to concerns of young Friends for more meaningful and effective integration of youth and young adult Friends into the life of the Meeting.

“Alaska Friends are keenly aware of and concerned about visible and destructive consequences of climate disruption: We noted ongoing constructive work of Alaska Friends to raise awareness of and counter climate disruption. We urge Friends everywhere to join this vital spirit-led work to defend creation.

“Alaska Friends ask all people of good will to join with us in countering racist and divisive words and actions. We have asked ourselves how our own Quaker history has contributed to divisions, intolerance, and white supremacy. We discern a need for healing work that confronts past actions including those of Friends that devalued and damaged indigenous cultures.”

6.2 Welcome to new members of our families

The Clerk invited Friends to introduce to us new babies and other young people newly welcomed home.

6.3 Video greetings from our Cuban friends

Jorge Luis Peña Reyes, Clerk Of Cuba Yearly Meeting, passed on greetings from all the members of Cuba Yearly Meeting and noted that “We’re making a documentary video on the 120-year presence of Quakers in Cuba, scheduled to be shown on state television this fall. It will feature some of the Quaker leadership and the Quaker churches here in Cuba. It will include a section about our long connection with New England Friends by way of the Puente de Amigos—the Bridge of Love.”

Elsa De Los Reyes, Secretary Of Vista Alegre Monthly Meeting greeted us with Psalm 133, which epitomizes the bonds that unite us: “It is truly wonderful when relatives live together in peace.

“How wonderful to be in touch with Friends in New England! Thanks be to God! For even though we can’t be together physically, we can still be united in Spirit

with all of you. I want to send you loving and cordial greetings on behalf of my monthly meeting.”

The Clerk thanked the interpreters who brought these words to us and shared our words with our Cuban and El Salvadorian Friends: Mary Hopkins (Fresh Pond), Judy Goldberger (Beacon Hill), David Currie (Amesbury), Iliana Matamouros (Framingham), Susanna McCandless (Burlington), James Rider (Mattapoissett), Russell Weiss-Irwin (Cambridge).

6.4 Minute to Authorize Edits and Corrections

Friends approved authorizing the Presiding, Recording, and Reading Clerks to make and approve edits, clarifications and corrections to the minutes of NEYM Sessions 2020.

6.5 Clerks’ Table nominations

Leslie Manning from Permanent Board brought to us for approval new nominations for Clerks’ table for the coming year:

Bruce Neumann (Fresh Pond), Presiding Clerk
Gina Nortonsmith (Northampton), Reading Clerk
Gordon Peters (Wellesley), Reading Clerk
Peter Bishop (Northampton), Recording Clerk
Kathleen Malin (Smithfield), Recording Clerk

Friends approved.

6.6 Report from the Working Group on Ministry & Spiritual Life

On behalf of Permanent Board, Leslie Manning reported that in December 2019 a Ministry & Spiritual Life Working Group was formed in response to

observations in the Clerking Structures and Practices Working Group report presented at 2019 Sessions. This new working group, consisting of Sarah Gant (Beacon Hill), Hugh McArthur (Hanover), Nancy Middleton (Putney), and Phil Fitz (Northampton), was asked to explore where and how support is currently happening amongst us and to recommend roles and structures to best serve the current needs of our beloved community. They expected to prepare a document to circulate to meetings before coming back to us at this year's sessions with recommendations. As a result of the pandemic, in March they were clear as a Working Group to lay aside their work for a time because the people they hoped to consult with were busy caring for our monthly meetings in this time of uncertainty. The group is now clear to resume that work and we look forward to receiving their report some time this fall at a Permanent Board meeting. Friends expressed gratitude for their work.

6.7 Appreciation for Honor Woodrow's work as clerk of Ministry & Council

Leslie Manning offered appreciation to the outgoing clerk of M&C, Honor Woodrow, a member of Framingham sojourning with Friends at Putney. Even at the best of times, serving in a leadership position in the Yearly Meeting is challenging and stretching, but at a time of uncertainty this has been an increasingly challenging task. And yet our dear F/friend has risen to that to the best of her abilities and sometimes, through grace, beyond. Honor brings us compassion, deep love for our community, and a capacity for deep listening that can cause her at times to sit in places of discomfort and dis-ease, and name hard truths, with love and compassion.

Her gifts have let her prioritize the needs of monthly meetings in discord and distress and to help them find their way through. She has made a commitment to enable our meetings to flourish and has spent much time helping us become the including and welcoming community we imagine ourselves to be. She has served us well and faithfully and we are so grateful for that service.

The clerk spoke to his appreciation of Honor's participation in Coordinating and Advisory.

6.8 Appreciation for Shearman Taber's work as treasurer

Frederick Martin (Beacon Hill), accounts manager for NEYM, noted that the treasurer's job is a complicated combination of delving into the numbers, giving the overview of everything, and relating that overview to everyone. Shearman has done a wonderful job with the combination. It goes without saying that he served with integrity and commitment but he also found areas where his unique abilities could simplify and improve our financial analysis. He has evidenced a passionate concern for equity as well, especially on the Board of Managers.

Noah Merrill (Putney), Yearly Meeting secretary, reflected on Shearman's long history of service. He was a member, then clerk, of Finance Committee, then treasurer of our Yearly Meeting. At the time he became treasurer we were facing a structural budget deficit and there was real pressure to focus on our financial viability at the expense of our ministry. Shearman helped guide us in our financial stewardship while also reminding us that that stewardship is only ever in service of our spiritual calling.

Noah noted "I hope that Shearman is the last treasurer of whom we ask so much, as we focus on removing barriers to participation by changing the responsibilities of the job. It is no accident that the work of the clerk of Ministry & Counsel and the treasurer were the two roles that were focused on last year as needing attention to make them more accessible."

6.9 Voices of those answering God's call

Anna Lindo (Framingham): Reflection on a deeper understanding of nonviolence

Nonviolence is an important part of Quaker values and always has been. Anna quoted Coretta Scott King, who said: "I must remind you that starving a child is violence. Neglecting school children is violence. Punishing a mother and her family is violence. Discrimination against a working man is violence. Ghetto housing is violence. Ignoring medical need is violence. Contempt for poverty is violence." Anna spoke to her experience concerning that definition of violence in schools.

"In 2016 I participated in City Year Boston, where I was placed in an underfunded school. I was assigned to work with a classroom teacher who needed to retire. She would take attendance, pass out a resource or worksheet, and then

ignore the class for hours on her phone. It got loud and she would yell at the loud Black girls and ADHD boys. The teacher said the real problem was that the parents were crackheads.

"Trump was elected that fall, and it was a terrifying time for the students, especially from immigrant families. A lot of the fear was related to families being split up by deportation. I am very lucky that none of my students or their immediate families got deported, but the fear kept everybody on edge. Separating families is violence.

"My liberal white friends say they only support nonviolent protests. Barrington Dunbar, 20th century Black Quaker anti-racist activist, said 'Black people living in the ghettos of American cities ... cannot hear Friends who profess the way of love and nonviolence, but yet maintain a destructive silence in obvious situations of social injustice.' So, what do we mean by 'I only support nonviolence?' Is it that we are uncomfortable watching buildings burn? Or does it mean that we are unwilling to oppose systemic violence? So I ask, what are you willing to do? I encourage us to sit with this question and let Spirit help guide us to find the answer."

Heather Denkmire (Portland): Racial Justice Accountability Groups

"I grew up believing I was one of the good white people. My dad was a minister in a Black neighborhood. I always considered myself as an activist. It was important to me at the time to see myself as not part of the problem. Then I began having a friendship with a woman who was Black. Class and race made the friendship bumpy, but I was writing a newspaper column at that time and one column that I wrote ended our friendship. Being a racist doesn't make me a bad person; my job is to undo it. I must call on God to relieve some of the fear, and be able to act before I feel ready.

"I took a racism class on 'What does it mean to be white in America?' Lisa Graustien shared a document about white supremacy culture, and that is my touchstone now. Things I needed to do for the class started falling off the calendar because I was busy, so I started asking other white people if they wanted to have a monthly check-in group. It's not a book club, but once a month we get together and each of us checks in and says 'This is what I've been doing in my antiracism work and this is what I plan to do this next month.'

"Things slide. I'm not going to bite off more than I can chew, but I'll leave my comfort zone. Sometimes I want to fix everything and there is this tension

between urgency and inaction. My whiteness tells me ‘You don’t have to do so much’ *and* it tells me ‘you have to do it now!’ We can’t just say we mean well; we need to start doing well.”

6.10 Noticing Patterns

Becky Jones, a member of the Noticing Patterns group, has noticed a pattern that around midweek, business sessions often get bogged down, but later in the week there is more of a feeling of openness. We have seen that this week.

She sees ways that we have been cracked open many times this week, and wonders if we might now be willing to trust the Reparations Working Group to hear what Friends have said about *A Call For Us to Act* and, having heard it, to create a document that we agree with in spirit that can go out to monthly meetings along with the NEYM Letter of Apology to Native Americans so that these two documents can go hand in hand.

The clerk noted that we do not have time to enter into discussion of this, but asked if Friends are ready to approve it.

Friends approved.

6.11 First Reading of our Epistle

We heard a first reading of the epistle for this year’s Sessions from Jay O’Hara (West Falmouth), Briana Halliwell (Vassalboro), and Debbie Humphries (Hartford) and were asked for feedback. Friends were invited to send comments via e-mail.

6.12 Closing Worship

We concluded our business with a moment of worship and celebration.

“Thank you for gathering us and shepherding us to a new place.”

Sunday morning August 9, 2020
Closing Celebration

7.1 Opening Worship

As we entered the virtual space, the slideshow of photos from meetings around New England was once again in progress. After a song from Annie and Peter Blood-Patterson (*Paz y Libertad en Este Mundo* [“We want peace and liberty in this world”]) we settled in for opening worship.

7.2 Report from Events Coordinator

Elizabeth Hacala, events coordinator, began by observing that a strong and vibrant team is stronger than the sum of their parts. It’s not a singer with backup, it’s a symphony.

She presented some statistics from this week’s gathering: 700 Friends registered for sessions. There was an average of 240 connections per event, with over 400 online for the plenary. The largest group participating together remotely was fifteen. Twenty percent of registrants were first time attenders. Twelve people joined us by phone. Nearly 300 attenders participated in home groups. Our participants included 19 Young Friends, 25 from Junior High Yearly Meeting, 26 in Junior Yearly Meeting, and 11 very young children. Faithfully financing NEYM through our “pay as led” option continued to ensure that cost is not a barrier to session attendance. We are grateful that you are here.

Elizabeth closed with a quote from the TV show *Babylon Five*: “The molecules of your body are the same molecules that make up ... the stars themselves. We are starstuff. We are the universe made manifest, trying to figure itself out. And as we have learned, sometimes the universe requires a change of perspective.”

7.3 Home Group Reflection

Holly Baldwin (Fresh Pond), who coordinated support for Home Group Facilitators, began with a quote from Ross Gay's *The Book of Delights*:

What if we joined our wildernesses together? ...

Is sorrow the true wild?

What if we joined our sorrows, I'm saying.

I'm saying: what if that is joy?

For many this year, home groups were a space where sorrows were joined together in a nurturing environment, and out of the wilderness, joy was created. Friends shared griefs, listened for leadings, and processed what they had heard in the plenary, bible half hours, and business meeting agenda items. Friends grieved not gathering in person and found comfort and inspiration in these small group spaces, along with opportunities for intimacy, although the closeness of the groups was challenging for some and home groups were not safe spaces for everyone.

Fifty five Friends acted as facilitators for twenty different home groups in which Friends were able to listen, dwell, and grow in the Spirit. In training these facilitators, as a yearly meeting we deepened our skills and practice in creating spaces where braveness and vulnerability thrive, and where we notice and interrupt patterns of oppression. Through the week home groups worked through themes of

- Connection & Community Building
- Sharing Spiritual Conditions
- Listening for How Spirit is Calling/God's Invitation
- Witness

We are learning and growing and that is good. Part of learning and growing is practicing, and part of practicing is making mistakes. Mistakes that come at the expense of some Friends.

Some Friends reported experiences of othering and microaggressions in their home groups, that were either inadequately addressed or caused by facilitators. In some cases a participant hurt by the pattern chose not to return to the homegroup, and, in the cases we know about, Friends had the option to join new groups. "To

Friends wounded in home groups this week, we apologize for the pains we caused you in spaces that were supposed to hold you.”

7.4 Reading of the Epistle

Jay O’Hara, Briana Halliwell, and Debbie Humphries read the NEYM epistle for our 2020 Sessions.

With appreciation for those who worked on it, Friends approved this reflection on our condition and our work together. (See the epistle on page ___)

7.5 Message from the Presiding Clerk

The Presiding clerk expressed his gratitude for the planning that went into our “big experiment” of holding Sessions online, along with appreciation for all of us who have participated.

He noted that while there were some who were able to attend *because* we were on Zoom, others stayed away due either to an inadequate internet connection or discomfort with the technology.

He shared that the various parts of Sessions this year felt all of a piece, from the opening celebration through Dr. Kemp’s plenary, through Bible half hours, business meeting, and home groups.

In business meeting three different documents that came to us used the phrase “Call to Action.” One was from the People of Color Pre-Gathering at Friends General Conference, asking Friends who identify as white to engage in reflection and action about the racial pandemic. One was from the reparations working group, encouraging Friends to learn more about Native Americans and to work on their behalf. And the last being a wider appeal for justice for people, for the earth and for the people who suffer most from climate degradation.

Indeed, the decay of the environment, the spread of a pandemic which has laid bare the inequalities many of us have turned a blind eye to for years, and the constancy of police violence have created in many of us an awareness that our complacency has festered for too long. The clerk asked the question that was on many of our hearts: Is it time for us, as a people who preach a foundational belief in

peace, to fight not just against militarization and nuclear weapons, but against the systemic racism which inflicts violence on the poor and on people of color?

Our clerk affirmed that as a Yearly Meeting we have everything we need: we have healers, teachers, mystics, artists, philosophers, nurturers, and hard workers. Can we honor all our many gifts and give each other support? Cherice Bock, quoting Romans 12, shared that not all the members of the body have the same function “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us”. Romans 12 also offers the concept “the body of Christ,” where each of us has a role, and none can exist without the other. We need activists, and we need ministers, but we need people to support the ministry, we need elders to ground all that we do, and we need pray-ers to pray for us all.

Words of encouragement completed the clerk’s remarks: “There is an essential pattern to our learning: Learn, DO, Reflect. Repeat. Let’s go home and start doing, but not at the expense of reflecting, and learning more. Let’s go home and spread the message: ‘the divine spirit is at work among us, and the world needs our attention.’ ”

7.6 Celebration of our Youth Programs

We enjoyed pictures of this week’s youth program in action, during which Kristina and Nahar Keefe-Perry (Fresh Pond) sang “Dear Friends” and Maggie Nelson (Portland) sang “My heart is ready and what am I gonna DO?”.

7.7 Sessions Coordinator

Rebecca Luechek, Sessions coordinator, expressed Friends' gratitude for all who have made this week possible. “I invite you to feel our interconnectedness and I ask, along the lines of how many are needed to screw in a lightbulb, how many Quakers does it take to crew our Sessions 2020 on its journey?”

Rebecca held up all the work of everyone on the way: the clerks’ table, our elders, epistle writers, home group planning team and facilitators, pastoral care team, noticing patterns group, Sessions Committee, Interpreters, youth program coordinators, members of various committees that brought us rich content for

discernment, the NEYM staff, and last, but not least, the Tech team. They build the boat.

She finished by reminding us that our voyage would not have been possible without everyone's presence, participation, love, and compassion. "We've all been rowing together this week. Gratitude and blessings for each one of you from all of us."

7.7 Epistles from the youth program

We received with joy an epistle from Junior Yearly Meeting read by Willard Peabody (Middlebury), a State of Society from Junior High Yearly Meeting read by Cora Redmond (Beacon Hill) and Conifer Gilbert (Cambridge), and an epistle from Young Friends read by Brennon Schifman (Providence), Olivia Mikkelsen (Worcester), and Emma Martin Mooney (New Haven).

7.8 Closing Worship

Friends closed in worship. Noah Merrill shared a message recalling Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea Trilogy. "They sing the eternal song that was in the beginning, that is written in our hearts, and in their singing their song comes more fully into the world. When the time to gather is done, they part with grief and gratitude and joy, returning in their smaller vessels. They depart knowing that the gathering is powerful and precious but their vessels were not made for the harbor they offer each other, they were made for the voyage. And whenever they feel alone or afraid they can turn to the song and find guidance and power in that moment. May it be so for us, Friends. May the dance and the story bless you and keep you until we meet again."

Rebecca Leuchek and Bill Monroe led us in a rendition of our theme song, "Row On," and our presiding clerk Bruce Neumann offered a closing prayer. We purpose and pray to meet again at Castleton University in Vermont, Aug 7-12, 2021.