

Youth Ministry Committee Annual Report to Sessions 2021

As we look back on a year like no other, we can see both the challenges and the creation of new ways of connecting. We have struggled with the physical separations imposed upon us by the coronavirus pandemic as well as the emotional separations our world has experienced as we begin to look more deeply at racism. There is a sense of cautious optimism about reopening, but we also sense that how we come together now may be different from how it was before.

During this past year, we have been grateful for the gifts of ministry to families offered by Youth Ministers Gretchen Baker-Smith, Maggie Nelson, Anna Hopkins, and Nia Thomas. Youth Programs and Friends Camp have provided youth and families with valuable outlets to stay connected and cared for, even if online. By offering loving and creative opportunities for connection online early in the pandemic, Youth Programs lit a way forward for the wider community to see how connection could be possible despite our separation.

Our committee has sought to lift up the creative and imaginative life growing in monthly meetings that are finding new ways of supporting youth and families and building bridges across generations. These included online gatherings for all ages, outdoor activities, family-centered worship opportunities, and other ways of building relationships between youth and across generations. These experiments taught us the value of fellowship and laughter, that adults often need the same opportunities for play and joy that youth need, that youth and families need direct and structured invitations into worship, and that to truly center youth and families we sometimes need to change our norms. We also held and supported youth workers across the Yearly Meeting who were working valiantly to keep families connected to their monthly meetings. Members of our committee organized three Zoom meetings for Friends engaged in local youth ministries to share their monthly meeting's struggles and successes and to find support for their work.

As monthly meetings begin the conversation about reopening their doors to in-person gatherings, our committee is looking at how this year has changed youth ministry. We acknowledge with sadness that some families have stopped attending monthly meetings, and we seek to support Friends in finding ways to reconnect with them. Through care packages containing supplies for "First Day School" activities families can do together, group hikes, "show and tell" and stories shared over Zoom, new experiments in family worship, and notes of encouragement quietly dropped in the mail,

meetings have maintained connections with youth and families during the pandemic in many imaginative ways.

There is a growing awareness and interest from monthly meetings in multigenerational programming, that our work is about engaging whole families and putting the spiritual life of youth at the center of our meetings. We rejoice at the prospect of being together again, and we look forward to building on what we have learned from our time online. As anyone who has worked in youth ministries knows, you must expect the unexpected. This year we were enveloped by the unexpected--and amidst all that was painful and hard, discovered unexpected joys and new possibilities.