

**Report from Rebecca Leuchak, Presiding Clerk of New England Yearly Meeting
to the Permanent Board of New England Yearly Meeting
May 10, 2025**

Friends, I have been praying for us these past months and in anticipation of our time together on Saturday. We are living in challenging times. So much around us has changed in a few short weeks. Paradoxically, while so much is happening and so fast for our country and for the world, yet now simultaneously so much is uncertain, transient, or in limbo. Friends across New England are deeply distressed, perhaps even overwhelmed, by the profound suffering and injustice that seem to grow with each passing day. While our deep longing for a better, kinder, loving, Spirit-filled world where all may thrive is so consuming, we may find little energy left to foster the necessary balancing of our event-fueled, reactive, and grieving selves with the more eternal trust and faith in the vision of Spirit's space and God's time.

In the midst of such confusion, where and how do we find ways to (re)establish that balance so that we have the stability of mind and heart to do the work that Spirit calls us to do? And how, if we do find clear grounding for our actions, do we do that with a true generosity of heart that the world is in such need of right now? Are we following the guidance of Friend Fox in these hard times, learning to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every person? Or are we succumbing to the culturally poisoned hunt for enemies – those we set up in opposition to ourselves – in the wider world and even within our own Friends communities?

I have seen much adversarial energy among us of late. This saddens me, yet I understand why this is so, given the stresses that we are all experiencing. I would urge us to resist the temptation to live in the pervasive culture of anger, blame, and vitriol that is so prevalent as a secular norm. What we need is to return to that which is essential and eternal, for in objectivizing and vilifying others we have strayed so very far from our testimonies. We need to restore the foundations of our Faith, to re-secure our spiritual base that is not focused on self-serving goals but is beyond self and fully obedient to the will of Spirit.

Let us be fully present and listening carefully, navigating tenderly with each other and with those we encounter in the wider world. Let us return to our source and affirm the eternal when all around us seems uncertain. May grace be our gift to offer. All of us gathered, in our own ways, are trying as best we know how to meet this moment. While there is much that tempts us to weariness, frustration and discouragement, we know that we have access to the Light. And that can help us to hold steady.

In our Quaker communities, our homes, and in our hearts may we find those streams of pure Spirit-led love and charity from which we can gain the strength to right so much that is wrong in our world. To remember that Friends have been and can be guided by Divine wisdom. So remind yourself and those around you that here we are together and, Friends, Spirit is with us! Through our service, our work together, we are moving towards God's active presence in the world. Let us grow the power of love, faith, mercy, hope. Let us together in our beloved community lift up the gifts of the Spirit. May we join the many others over more than three hundred years who have labored faithfully to build our beloved community. May we say "yes" to the Truth and Life that each of us is invited to embrace.

May we be the light in the darkness!

The thoughts above were written as much for me as they are to share with you. My main activities in the past several months have been several:

I continue to serve as clerk for the Coordinating and Advisory Committee, which has met several times since our last Permanent Board meeting. (See the Committee Report in the Advance Documents.) Currently I am planning for that committee's annual June retreat.

Our 365th NEYM Annual Sessions gathering with the theme "Streams in the Desert," is just three months away, this year moving to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst campus, and my work is accelerating in preparation.

In addition to working others in planning the scope and shape of this year's Sessions, I am holding some specific concerns which are evolving:

1. Preparing for Sessions, I am holding in my heart the full spectrum of Friends' experience and individuals' needs in these turbulent times. Our Sessions gathering will be an important time for sharing our reactions to current instabilities. But I also recognize that there must needs be a balance between the grieving and the affirmation of God's abiding love and care for the world and for all of us. Finding that balance together is not a static end goal, but rather a dynamic process of finding Spirit within us to sustain and encourage us to adapt to change and cultivate resilience. **My hope is that our time at Sessions will offer us the reminder that divine love can be experienced by each one of us and suffuses our assembled body and all of creation. That through love and the assurance of God's care and grace we will find strength.**
2. From the Sessions Visioning learnings and conversations with many individual Friends over the past several years, I have heard a yearning for deep spiritual communion and concerns about both the quality and quantity of corporate worship when we are together.

May I invite us to recognize the presence of Spirit across the whole of the Sessions programming? May I encourage us to attune our attention to Spirit in all that we do? May we arrive in Spirit, join in Sessions activities in Spirit, attend to business in Spirit, sing and dance and tell really bad jokes at Coffee House in Spirit, and partake of our meals in spiritual mindfulness. How marvelous when Spirit infuses all of our time together! That is something to be aware of and to cultivate actively! And an important practice to carry into the rest of our lives.

The quality question is a matter, I firmly feel, that we all hold responsibility for, and I call us all to greater self-discipline in the practice. May I suggest that the quality of what we do depends on the way that we arrive. I am not suggesting here that we plan in advance certain specific attitudes or actions to bring and enact. But offer that, in our time leading up to Sessions, we prepare for the discipline of listening to Spirit's leading. If we do that by carefully reading the advance documents, through our prayerful planning and packing, and in the journeying (in the sense of a holy pilgrimage) to arrive on campus, then when we are together the fertile soil allowing Spirit-led discernment to flourish will have been well established and may produce

amazing fruit. By coming together may we build ever richer soil for the discernment of right action. May we support each other in being patterns and examples in speaking truth to power. For doing God's work.

3. Corollary to the above is the concern I have heard from many Friends that agendas for the **meetings for worship for the purpose of business have felt too packed to allow for deep discernment. I am crafting those agendas this year in a more spacious way.** And while we are deeply grateful for all the work that our committees, working groups, and resource groups do, we will appreciate their reports in the advance documents for Sessions. Though I personally value the opportunity to hear in real time from those faithful Friends who do so much good work – to see them with us and hear their spoken words - there will be many fewer formal presentations of these groups from the stage this year.
4. **Reconsideration of the process for recording and approving minutes in our meetings for worship for the purpose of business is ongoing.** I am awaiting the approval of nominations for a recording clerk and a reading clerk, in order to work with the full clerks' table in discernment of a proposal for a way of doing this. One that lifts up the importance of the process as faithful to Spirit and also takes into consideration the realities of our gathering together and the capacity of those Friends whom we have asked to serve.
5. Over the past year, in the Yearly Meeting's evolving companionship and support of our quarterly meetings, we have rejoiced in these quarters' faithfulness of Spirit and example of new forms emerging and affirmations of new life in these challenging times. Salem Quarter's journey through a period of Sabbath and into a period now of creative vision for the future is one example of the overarching power of Spirit moving in our quarterly communities. There are many others. **I will be asking our quarters to share with us at Sessions some of their experience of living as a Friends community in Spirit. We have much to learn from each other!**
6. Once again this year we affirm the importance of community as have Friends for the 365 years that Quakers in New England have gathered for Annual Sessions. We also know that we are, as individuals and in our humanly constructed institutions, deeply flawed and mistake-prone beings. These are the conditions in which we may see our Sessions site, the campus of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, as an example of the complex realities of the world we all navigate. The objection raised about the site for Sessions 2025, based upon concern over the University's decisions on how to deal with a protest on the campus last year, merits serious consideration. Yet the situation may provide the opportunity for us to lean into working with the University to learn from missteps in a compassionate way. I will refer you to an excerpt from the letter that Phil Veatch, rising presiding clerk, and I sent out earlier this week to all Friends in New England: **"Let us take care to guard against the adversarial, separating energy that is sowing such pain in our wider society, and not allow it to undermine our long tradition of laboring together across differences."**

I remind you that plenary speaker at Sessions this year will be Gretchen Baker Smith of Westport Meeting, well known and loved by many in our Yearly Meeting. Our Bible-half-hour presenter will be

Kirenia Criado Pérez of the Iglesia de los Amigos in Havana, Cuba. Our bridge of love “Puente de Amigos” is an ever stronger connection. And we will again have an intergenerational musical plenary with Kim Moberg (Tlingit) who through storytelling and music will present an Anishinaabe prophecy of relevance for our times.

I hope to see you all at Sessions this August!

Continuing in Our Witness Concerning Religious Freedom

As Noah Merrill, Secretary of New England Yearly Meeting, and I shared at the March Permanent Board meeting, our Yearly Meeting partnered with Friends in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore Yearly Meetings to file a lawsuit challenging new governmental policy changes which would allow immigration enforcement in houses of worship. Since then we have received many messages of support and requests for more information. Most recently the Friends Journal project “Quaker Speak” interviewed me about the matter. This action taken by our Yearly Meeting offers us all an opportunity for reflection on how we are doing God’s work in the world.

Ex-officio Support of Committees and Working Groups

I continue to attend and support committees and working groups of the Yearly Meeting, including the Noticing Patterns Working Group, Right Relationship Resource Group, the Legacy Gift Fund, the Finance Committee, Spiritual Life Listening Group, and the Accompaniment Group.

All of the above brings me back to the appreciation of you and all in our New England faith community. For your faithful service to our community at the monthly, quarterly, and yearly meeting levels. For our time spent together in our regular meetings of the Permanent Board, the many opportunities throughout the year for gathering, and in our Annual attendance at Sessions. The vision we share and the seeds of change that we are nurturing, whether in our witness for social justice in this country where so much at risk, for our planet where change is accelerating, for our reimagined Sessions gathering, and our ongoing work of right relationship and working through conflict, these are all opportunities for Spirit to shine.

This is indeed the fertile ground of the Spirit in which we grow.