

PYM Outgoing Epistle 2016

To Friends Everywhere,

Greetings from the 336th Annual Sessions of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, held at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, from July 27 to 31, 2016.

What is God calling Quakers in our Yearly Meeting to do next to end racism and white supremacy in the Religious Society of Friends and beyond? What will the blessed community look like in the future? How can we create a welcoming and inclusive space for all Friends? Just as the caterpillar struggles to transform into a butterfly, so we have struggled to understand and address the racism present in our yearly meeting.*

Our theme this year comes from Romans 12:2, “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Five hundred Friends, ranging from a few weeks to 96 years old, gathered together with the hope and longing to be transformed. We are thankful for the wonderful hospitality provided by Muhlenberg College, especially the friendly, helpful kitchen staff who supported our work by providing healthy food and frozen yogurt. Our Young Friends have reminded us that the Native Americans once lived upon this land.

We were enriched by the presence of Friends from Vihiga Yearly Meeting, East Africa Yearly Meeting (Kaimosi), Britain Yearly Meeting, Southeastern Yearly Meeting, and New York Yearly Meeting. We joined in song with Tribe 1 for an interactive, inventive, and deeply moving concert, which led to a joyful conga-line dancing to “I Can See Through Illusion.”

In our Meetings for Business, we approved nominations and a budget, as well as receiving reports from our Councils, committees, and organizations who are important partners in the wider Quaker world. Each afternoon, we participated in Work and Witness or Undoing Racism Workshops. We look forward to a new version of Faith and Practice, which has been a labor of love over seven years for a small but determined committee. We appreciated the guidance and structure provided by our clerks.

Our children and youth program leaders shared joy, laughter, leadership, and fun through our all together time each day.

Most importantly, throughout Annual Sessions we have talked, thought, prayed, and worshipped about how we will address racism and white supremacy. We disagreed; we protested; we were frustrated, angry, and discouraged. We are being held in the light and we seek its guidance. In all our conversations we made great efforts to speak our Truth with a goal of transforming ourselves and our yearly meeting. Our Young Friends testified that the phrase “people of color” did not resonate with them, to the extent that it should be changed.

The Undoing Racism Group presented a proposal for formalizing the structure, leadership, and governance of Undoing Racism Group in relationship with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Using a tool, “Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Institution,” we attempted to place our Yearly Meeting along a spectrum of structural racism. Many of our conversations about racism continued long into the night, in big and small groups, during meals, and in the hallways outside our formal sessions.

On Saturday evening, our keynote speaker, dr. tonya thames taylor, carried us to her grandmother’s 5’x7’ front porch, in Gulfport, Mississippi. From that porch, we heard lessons young tonya learned about resilience, the power of language, and encouraging one another – “when a situation arises, you recognize the pain and the struggle, but you don’t let it rob you of your humanity”. In her inspirational

and challenging message, tonya drew from the Bible, African American history, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Henry David Thoreau. tonya left us with a query: When you have a burning bush experience, how will you respond? How do you be subversive and transforming?

The Undoing Racism Group has asked us to envision a blessed community. We will continue our labors to discern how to move rightly toward achieving that end.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so I'm happy, tonight.
I'm not worried about anything.
I'm not fearing any man!
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!
Martin Luther King, Jr., I've Been to the Mountaintop

* Many describe the central issue as “white supremacy,” which legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley defines as “a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.” <http://www.pym.org/addressing-racism/wp-content/uploads/sites/32/2016/05/Working-Document-of-Undoing-Racism-Group-Fostering-Beloved-Communities-of-Love-and-Justice.pdf>

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