

We as Friends are called to work and witness for justice, wholeness, and connection. We feel a hunger to be gathered in the Spirit despite great pain and brokenness within our body and in the wider world.

Worship Sharing: Questions of Race, Inclusion & Diversity July 28, 2019

To Friends everywhere:

Greetings from the 339th Annual Sessions of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, held on the traditional land of the Lenni-Lenape at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, New Jersey, from July 23 to 28, 2019. We recognize Lenni-Lenape peoples past and present and honor ancient and contemporary spiritual connections.

How do we Center ourselves in Trust and Love? was the theme as Friends from meetings in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania were joined by Friends from other yearly meetings as well as traveling Friends from Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ireland, and Lebanon. We sought to deepen our spiritual ground, enhance our ability to listen, to be teachable, and to share with each other through our work, play, and worship. This year an Artist in Residence, Eric Anthony Berdis, shared his energetic spirit, warmly inviting friends to contribute their own creativity to a fiber art project, which he will later exhibit.

Our time together began with a retreat led by our Spiritual Formation Collaborative, which helped us to center ourselves in trust and love. On our first evening together, all ages of Friends gathered across generations to experience the Faith & Play story, “Listening for God.” During the waiting worship that followed, we wondered where and how else we listen for and find God in our lives. Vespers each evening created a space for reflection and community after a full day of activity.

Multi-generational worship began each day. During one “All Together Time,” Young Friends led us in an activity that helped us understand and practice Enthusiastic Consent. We were challenged to ask for consent — verbal, emotional, and uncoerced consent — before engaging in physical contact, such as a hug. This lifts up our testimony of equality, and respects the specific movement of Spirit within each individual. Friends received this teaching with deep appreciation, and some noted how the practice modeled a respect that we could bring to bear not just as we offer to hug someone, but also as we consider the challenging nature of our work. Friends recognize that even the youngest among us can lead us towards new knowledge and deep understanding.

This year, the facing bench was draped with a table skirt created through the “One Quilt, One Yearly Meeting” project, stitching together individual patches contributed by our monthly meetings, collaboratives, and Friends schools. Our clerk encouraged us to be vulnerable, to love more deeply, to lean into challenges, and to embrace our stumbling steps forward. Our clerk repeatedly challenged us to not get stuck seeking perfection, but instead to work with the “good enough” of our broken world and our imperfect Religious Society of Friends. Valerie Brown, our keynote speaker also emphasized the importance of being vulnerable with each other in her interactive program that moved us to share.

Moving forward with business required us to revisit the impact of racism and the resulting trauma in our yearly meeting. We made space in our agenda to focus on

concerns that arose during our meetings for business, specifically on racism and the sustainability of the Religious Society of Friends.

White privilege and white supremacy continue to exist within our yearly meeting. Individual hearts are at various points, including some who feel emotionally raw, but how has our organization changed since our called session on racism and the resulting minute of 2015? Several Friends rose in meeting to share the transformative work taking place within their monthly and quarterly meetings, specifically including reparations, food banks, training sessions, and community investment.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting needs to address trauma inflicted on beloved souls in our Quaker family and to attack the roots of racism inside and outside our religious society. This is the cry of Spirit in our midst. Stories of heartfelt emotion and pain stemming from our history and our current practices moved Friends to share what is weighing on their souls. Friends lifted up prayer for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, naming concerns that threaten our vision for the future.

Acknowledging the impact of racism has forced some of us to recognize personal presumptions, and the often invisible culture of privilege that is contrary to the leadings of Spirit. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting accepts accountability for the real hurt experienced by Friends of color.

We need to examine our traditions and structures. Young Adult Friends asked us to consider their concerns around the traditional structures of membership. The requirement of monthly meeting membership can be a barrier for those who wish to more fully participate in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and the wider Quaker world. Might we discuss what membership means and how to welcome those who seek fellowship and service within our community?

Our Quaker Life Council united with a minute of concern from Haddonfield Quarterly Meeting: “Haddonfield Quarterly Meeting joins with people of good will everywhere in affirming the way of love. We denounce the normalization of hate and violence in society and within ourselves. We commit to working with others to build trust and understanding in our wider community.”

A Friend and pastor from Bolivia shared with us the dramatic effects of climate change in her country, and the water crisis that has emerged as a result. Bolivian Friends established a Bilingual Friends Center where Young Friends connect those in need to safe drinking water. She asks Friends to be aware of the effects of climate change in our world, and to support the efforts of Friends and Young Friends in her country and elsewhere.

During their affinity time, Friends of African Descent met for an Mbongi, a Congolese word that means “the learning circle,” to discuss the Friends General Conference Institutional Assessment on Systemic Racism. Friends found unity to encourage Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to engage with the results of that assessment.

All of us live in the heart of God with the help of others. Friends desire to remain teachable as imperfect people. We continue to stumble forward as we seek to hold each other and invite you to hold us in trust and love.