



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
OF FRIENDS
QUAKERS

Young Friends Epistle Sessions 2017

44 Young Friends, high-school aged, gathered for the New England Yearly Meeting Annual Sessions from August 5-10, 2017 at Castleton University to build community and explore our faith and practice of Quakerism, who we are as a group, and where we stand in the wider Yearly Meeting. We kicked off the week with a name game where Friends went around in a circle and shared their favorite invisible thing. As the week progressed we continued to explore invisible ideas such as transformation, white supremacy, inclusion, grief, and joy.

Friends gathered at the opening worship under a breezy outdoor pavilion and listened to, among other speakers, a beloved Resource Person (RP), Xinef Afriam, as he shared a story of transition, fear, and resilience with a metaphor about the caterpillar's transition to a butterfly. Like the imaginal cells which hold the blueprints for the butterfly but are perceived as threats and are defeated until they are strong and many enough, friends felt reminded that we hold the blueprints for the future we want, though we will face challenges in our effort to make them real.

Plenary speaker Ruby Sales visited Friends to inform us of how systemic racism denies people of color many of their basic needs. She shared her own experiences, describing white supremacy as a "spiritual malformation", and explained how many of the terms used by the populous make it difficult to see these problems that plague society. Ruby also urged us to focus on rebuilding the system, instead of denouncing easily accused targets. Reactions were mixed. Friends reported feeling empowered, frustrated, angry, sad, comforted, enlightened, hopeful, helpless, and inspired. Later, Friends were invited to a smaller follow-up session to discuss these topics further.

We enjoyed multiple programs shared with the Young Adult Friends (YAF aged 18-35) exploring the theme of transformation. The first revolved around transformation in community. An especially effective forum we used to discuss was the "Angel of Curiosity." Groups of three were formed one member acting as speaker sharing frustrations with barriers they faced in the context of their community, another as listener, and the third as the Angel. The role of the Angel was to be a deep listener who helped us arrive more completely at our full truth by asking open ended questions and being curious. The second program was centered around systemic transformation led by some FCNL staff. Participants were asked to think about how their Quaker experiences can aid them in activism and work outside of the yearly meeting. Another program examined the ways in which the Quaker community does not always model the inclusion that we seek and we explored what true inclusion would look like. The guest speaker, Emily Provance, helped us to think specifically about the ways Quaker communities can sometimes wedge divides between old and young groups making NEYM feel less accessible to people because of their age. Our shared workshops with YAFs were a good model seeking the goal of inclusion, in addition to being relevant to our continuous conversation about transformation, as many graduating friends begin to think about Quaker communities past high school.

In another program led by RP Hel Staab we explored transformation in both personal and social settings. Young Friends drew images or words of their grief or what they wanted their grief to turn into onto puzzle pieces and then combined their pieces to create four completely different wholes. The theme stood out in this activity as many drew images of their grief transformed.

Young friends visited the adult business meeting for discussion on white supremacy, and the meeting's past decision to make a significant attempt to eliminate white supremacist systems. Young Friends resource person Xinef Afriam discussed his own experience with joining the yearly meeting. He then provided an analogy which described the system of the yearly meeting as a container which was primarily capable of holding white Friends. He continued, explaining our need to replace this outdated container with one which can hold all people equally. Later in the week, many Young Friends and YAFs reconvened to continue the conversation, making plans to spark conversations and initiate specific action at their monthly meetings and bring these to the Yearly Meeting. These younger groups felt hopeful and focused in their mission to pull their weight in our larger community's effort to address internalized racism.

Just as reflection is central to our practice, so too is rejoicing. Throughout the week, Young Friends participated in many activities such as capture the flag, a lake trip, singing, an intergenerational contradance, screen printing, glitter globe creating, and other various shenanigans. As has happened in most Annual Sessions, Young Friends also became immersed in our own Quaker processes. During our business meetings, some friends on the "Theme Team" shared their current plans regarding the themes for our retreats during the school year, Nom Com (Nominating Committee) shared their pending slate for the next year's M&C (Ministry and Council), and the group discussed how we want our community to be and exist.

A community's strength can become clear through trial. After two central commitments of our program were broken, our community has been called to reflect on what it means to set boundaries and stick by them in terms of our commitment to each other, youth relationships with adults, and our place in the wider community. There was a wide range of responses. Some folks were vocal in calling for change and other voices expressed the importance of our commitments and the safety of the community. We began to discern what shouldering accountability might look like when treasured members of our community overstep our shared boundaries. Many friends saw this moment as an opportunity for growth and reflection on how we ask for accountability or look for restoration and rebuilding of trust. Friends agreed that our love for each other must be the core of any decisions we make moving forward. Young Friends emerged from another business meeting with a strong commitment to further explore the shape of the community and its forms of leadership through a reimagined M&C retreat.

We parted feeling tired but hopeful for our future as a community. We will continue to hold each other with love and care as our community transforms. Just as the yearly meeting is seeking to become a container that can better hold everyone, young friends are also committed to improving our container with love and compassion for each other.