

Epistle to all Friends

From Intermountain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Durango, Colorado / June 2023

To Friends Everywhere:

We send greetings from Intermountain Yearly Meeting (IMYM) at Fort Lewis College in southwestern Colorado. Here, on a mesa above the Animas River Valley, near the southern edge of the San Juan Mountains, we were greeted with cool clear mornings and abundant sun. We welcomed the sun, as we welcomed one another, celebrating the warmth that we feel in our fellowship here. We experience this fellowship in conversation, which reminds us that we can listen to one another into a sense of wonder and discovery and into the loving presence of the Spirit. We also feel this presence when we open ourselves in the stillness of silent worship, when we listen to one another in worship sharing circles, and when we break bread together.

The indigenous traditions that are so deeply rooted in this region have much to teach us about the presence of the Spirit. This land is the ancestral land and territory of the Nuuchiu (Ute) people who were forcibly removed from most of their homeland by the United States Government. This land is also connected to the communal and ceremonial spaces of the Jicarilla Abache (Apache), Pueblos of New Mexico, Hopi Sinom (Hopi), and Diné (Navajo) Nations. It is important to acknowledge this setting because the dominant cultural narratives in this region have long been told without full recognition of its original residents who continue to inhabit and connect with this land.

We realize that such acknowledgements are only meaningful if they represent a commitment to healing and reconciliation with our indigenous neighbors. This also begins with listening. This year, Friends were able to find out how we might support the Kwiyaqat Community Academy, a charter school in the Ute Mountain Ute town of Towaoc. Kwiyaqat offers their students an innovative curriculum, which integrates Ute culture and language, and is deeply enhanced by the presence and participation of tribal elders. We are grateful for the opportunity to listen, learn and offer our support to this exciting project.

This kind of outreach depends on the vitality of our yearly meeting and we came to this year's gathering wondering how best to restore that in our community. Last year we were unable to find unity on a nomination for presiding clerk. It was difficult to fill other positions of responsibility. So we opened ourselves to the Spirit, inviting the kind of support and guidance that would help us recognize and celebrate that of God in one another, while also acknowledging our differences and divisions. Shortly thereafter, we were heartened by the work of Jerry Peterson, our interim clerk, and many other dedicated volunteers who stepped up to address our need for restored vitality and new direction. A Way Forward Committee was created to take on the important work of gathering ideas and insights from members of our yearly meeting addressing some fundamental queries. What is the purpose of our yearly meeting and is it currently fulfilling that purpose? What would a healthy and sustainable yearly meeting look like and how do we get there from here? We spent much of our time together exploring these queries, which we will continue to do into the fall.

Given the importance of queries, which have helped Friends find a way forward throughout our history, we are accustomed to living with questions. In the history of our yearly meeting, there have been many instances where we were faced with important considerations, but none of them were any more fundamental than the current queries which invite us to consider who we are, why we're here, and whether or not we can remain viable heading into the future? Given the tumultuous changes we face not only in our yearly meeting, but also in the world around us, these are not easy questions to answer and they leave us, at times, with deep uncertainty.

Jon Watts, producer both of the *Quaker Speak Videos* and the *Thee Quaker Podcast* was our plenary speaker this year, an energetic and innovative teacher, musician, and Quaker leader who has embraced many of the changes we face in the realm of media and communications, offered us some guidance and encouragement in terms of restoring our vitality. We realize that many other yearly meetings face some of the same challenges: an aging membership, less energy for the work of sustaining the yearly meeting, concerns around dwindling numbers especially in terms of young friends.

Any hope of continued sustainability begins with the nurture and support of our young friends. Over the course of our gathering, we were reminded that a yearly meeting needs to embrace new methods of communication in order to connect with young Friends. Sharing samples of his work in video and podcasting, Jon showed us how that can be done. Young Friends also need the time and space to create their own spiritual community. While there are certainly ways that older Friends can lend their support for this to happen, it is also true that Young Friends need autonomy, independence, and space to be together and nurture one another.

Despite the challenges we face, we are heartened by the resilience of our community. We continue to take the Quaker gift of compassionate listening into various forms of outreach including our work on advocacy teams with the Friends Committee on National Legislation. We continue the work of listening, learning and supporting our indigenous neighbors. We continue to listen to those who are struggling—those without shelter in our towns, those without a country along our borders—so that we might speak out with compassion on their behalf.

And as we continue to ponder the queries of how best to reinvigorate our meeting, and how to remain vital in the work of addressing the needs and challenges around us, we continue to listen carefully to one another and, in doing so, to the movement of the Spirit among us.

With Gratitude and Love,



Interim Presiding Clerk
Intermountain Yearly Meeting

