

Lake Erie Yearly Meeting 2014 Epistle

Greetings to Friends Everywhere:

The Lake Erie Yearly Meeting has met in annual sessions from July 24th-27th, 2014, in Bluffton, Ohio, for worship with attention to business, fellowship, growth in the Spirit, and fun and laughter. We have enjoyed sparkling summer weather on the campus of Bluffton University and are grateful to the University for this pleasant meeting place once again. One-hundred twenty-nine Friends gathered, including 106 adults and 23 youth.

We heard Spirit speaking in the epistle of the German Yearly Meeting, read to us by our assistant clerk. German Friends criticized their government's policy of barricades against refugees and urged leaders to receive those in need and to respect their human dignity. We were reminded that diversity is a strength and that what some see as shades of gray others see as an array of colors. These Friends prepared us to think deeply about our theme of "Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges."

Our plenary speaker, Scilla Wahrhaftig, from the AFSC office in Pittsburgh, shared her rich insights into this theme. She led us in bridging the two halves of the meeting room musically, when we sang this round:

Building bridges between our divisions, I reach out to you, will you reach out to me? With all of our voices and all of our visions, Friends, we can make such sweet harmony!

Scilla gave us powerful strategies for reducing tension in confrontations, such as asking open-ended questions, taking time to breathe, and relaxing our body language. Bridges can be built in many ways, she reminded us, and we greatly enjoyed seeing a model bridge of cardboard boxes of many sizes, shapes, and colors built earlier in a workshop. On the boxes workshop participants had written what it takes to build bridges, including courage, love, listening, and humor. Scilla reminded us bridges can work when they are built together from each side toward the middle, and they can also work when built entirely from one side. She invited us to tell each other stories of our own efforts at bridge building, and thus we made ourselves open to the Light of others.

Above all, Scilla reminded us of the great power that lies in listening. When we are tempted to confront another by saying, "I'm going to tell you how it is," we should consider how much greater is the power that lies in asking, "How is it for you?" She observed that when those who are wounded and broken can tell their stories and be truly heard, anger dies away and the seeds of peace are sown. When we listen, our own language softens, for listening is the cardinal act of giving and the source of peace.

We listened in love and admiration as volunteers for this year's LEYM workcamp told us of their work with Cass Community Social Services, a nonprofit in Detroit. Immediately before our annual sessions, a 12-person, multigenerational group was there for three days, preceded by a group of six LEYM teen volunteers, who spent a weekend at CCSS. The team told us how they cooked meals for large numbers of homeless people and cleared years' worth of weeds and brush from a derelict property. They described the grimy and exhausting work of sorting and shredding paper, and turning discarded tires into doormats and sandals and scrap wood and glass into coasters. The slide show revealed inner-city Detroit as a world most of us are hardly aware

exists, and we appreciated the bridges these Friends built into that world. We look forward to more opportunities for volunteer work in the coming years.

We were deeply saddened to learn that there had been sexual abuse between two children in our meetings more than a decade ago. We approved a minute making our member meetings aware of the possibility that this can happen, and asked our clerk to form an ad hoc committee on the topic of sexual abuse.

We delighted in our rejuvenated Earthcare Committee and supported our Peace Committee's deep concerns for the Gaza-Israel conflict and the crisis of child immigration on our southern border.

On our last night together we enjoyed those of all ages who shared their gifts in the talent show and made us feel bound together in joy. We are thankful for this time of spiritual renewal together.