

Epistle to all Friends
Lake Erie Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends
July 25-28, 2019
Bluffton University, Bluffton, Ohio

“(We) remain(s) a vibrant community of dedicated, caring, flawed and lovely Quakers. Gathering together for worship, study, fellowship or work strengthens our bonds and renews our spirits. We face the uncertain future not afraid and not alone. Puzzled sometimes and often tired but willing to try in love, in kindness, in hope and grace. We are finding our way step by prayed step.”

--Kalamazoo Friends Meeting

To Friends Everywhere,

We arrived in Bluffton, Ohio from college towns like Ann Arbor and Athens, big cities like Pittsburgh and Cleveland and communities throughout Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania with small worship groups and growing meetings. Bluffton is a place that for many is full of memories of past yearly meeting sessions; those that gathered found comfort in the familiar and also engaged energetically with what is new.

The 25 participants in the children’s program delighted to be with each other and spent their time singing, crafting, and in active play. Our evening of talent and ice cream brought out surprises and hidden skills among us, including delightful round-singing by the children, original poetry and song, and music from Pete Seeger to J.S. Bach. We heard creative re-interpretations of a Psalm and of Micah 6. Four Friends presented a report on their sojourn at the FWCC Section of the Americas gathering in dramatic form, some of it in Spanish, ending in the group song that summed up their joyful experience of listening and ministering with Evangelical, Conservative and Unprogrammed Friends: *Demos Gracias al Señor*.

We were led to go deeper in our corporate business. With thoughtful, substantive consideration of inclusion, we approved a new policy to provide guidance to adults who feel they have experienced harassment during our time together and developed a new scholarship fund for LEYM youth who choose to attend a Quaker college or internship experience. The theme of inclusion was also reflected in discussion of FGC's process of becoming an anti-racist organization, and in reports on how individual meetings within LEYM have taken up this work. We were reminded that true anti-racist practice - and indeed, radical inclusion on a wider scale - must be practiced like preventative dental care. While there is no fixed destination or closure to this work, we had the hopeful sense that in many cases, we are reporting from a place of new experimentation and implementation - one step along the way.

One example of this experimentation was our intentionality around food choices during Sessions. Broadmead Monthly Meeting, in coordination with LEYM’s Earthcare Committee created signage around the dining hall that educated us on the environmental cost of different food choices, menus were largely vegetarian, and youth served as compost helpers/educators. Both participants and dining hall staff were enthusiastic about the resulting reduction in waste and impact.

Our plenary speaker Joyce Ajlouny, American Friends Service Committee’s General Secretary, shared information on AFSC's history as well as the ways its work is manifesting in the world, led by people who are impacted by oppression. Their current planning process is illustrating that AFSC fills needs where others do not go. Its work shows ways we can join in their courage to accompany and support those whose voices are silenced, including immigrants, the incarcerated, and - as Joyce shared in stories from her own life - the Palestinian people.

Reflections on gaps in our nominating committee slate and a dinner with Monthly Meeting clerks provoked reflection on the core value of LEYM to its members. We know that many members of monthly meetings do not even know of, let alone take advantage of, LEYM resources or opportunities. We have an opportunity to learn more about who we are. What do meetings most need from a larger Quaker body? How does this match, or not match, ways we are currently organized? What new forms and practices might emerge if we identified different objectives? Exploring these possibilities already releases us from guilt and gives access to new energy and enthusiasm.

Repeatedly, in business sessions and in workshops, we heard of the value of connections to each other and to the Earth, meeting-to-meeting, meetings to Quaker organizations, between individuals within meetings, and with the Divine [God]. We turn to each other with more urgency in a world with needs that leave us, at times, hopeless and despairing. We struggle to live with the damage and our complicity, unsure how to balance comfort and challenge in our lives.

In sessions, we heard a request for endorsement of a traveling minute and considered ways we may be best equipped to support people whose call is to travel among Friends and how we support gifts both at the monthly and yearly meeting level. In various workshops, the theme of moving from inward deepening to interconnection was frequently raised up. We have hope that with deeper connections, we may learn better how to name our gifts and understand the work that we are uniquely suited to do.

Our hearts have been made lighter and more tender through sharing your epistles, whether you are yearly meetings that are regrouping after rupture or are finding community in diverse expressions of our faith. We are grateful for the opportunity to be in relationship and send prayers that Truth continues to prosper with you all.

Nancy Reeves, *Presiding Clerk, Cleveland Friends Meeting*

LEYM Epistle Committee

Josephine Posti, *Assistant Clerk, Pittsburgh Friends Meeting*

Lisa Klopfer, *Ann Arbor Monthly Meeting*

Susan Loucks, *Pittsburgh Friends Meeting*