

“Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.”

Isaac Pennington, 1667

To Friends everywhere,

New England Yearly Meeting Friends gathered for our 355th annual sessions 1–6 August 2015, at Castleton University in Castleton, Vermont, seeking ways to deepen our spiritual lives and strengthen our witness by ‘Living into Covenant Community’.

During the week, through many programs and events, we were made aware that living into covenant community means faithfully supporting one another towards a larger purpose. Covenant means confronting climate disruption, gender inequality, racial violence, and other daunting issues as full and equal partners with all people and other life communities. As indigenous peoples have been saying all along, “what we do to the web of life we do to ourselves”.

Several speakers and panellists framed many of today’s urgent peace, social, and ecological problems as violations of covenant community. “Racism drains spiritual energy” from the community and therefore harms everyone, not only the oppressed. “We need to stand for Truth, although it may hurt at times.” Financial sustainability is part of our covenant within our yearly meeting. “We need to find a way to live within our means; we can’t keep depleting our seed corn.”

Some Friends, excited by Pope Francis’s recent encyclical calling on the world to confront human-induced climate change as a moral crisis, urged us to find ways for our own religious society’s traditionally slow decision-making process to respond to the urgency of this and other global concerns.

Our call to covenant also extends to the work of our monthly and quarterly meetings, our support for the work of the yearly meeting, and our engagement with the larger community. Our yearly meeting staff and our youth programs have been good patterns and examples: modeling inclusive and loving relationships among themselves, nurturing one another’s gifts, and caring for one another have led to the flourishing of their outward work.

Our Bible Half-Hour speaker emphasized that welcoming and healing the oppressed and the excluded of society is at the heart of our beloved community. In our covenant of unconditional love we become the integrated and balanced individuals and meetings we need to be in our work and ministry.

Our yearly meeting secretary challenged us to discern ways in which Friends must be both rooted in our traditions and adaptive to emerging needs as we strive to “make love visible and all things new”. As a great people to be gathered we need a dynamic organization that helps our work to be experienced as a joy rather than a burden. He likened our religious society’s long journey into truth to a team of mountain climbers, who require coordination, often find the going slow, and must take risks to keep moving forward. At different points on our spiritual journey, like climbers who

hammer in spikes as anchors to hang onto when they slip, or return to from stuck places, we need to pause regularly to affirm the truths that find life in us.

One Friend reminded us that faithfulness is a process rather than an accomplishment—yet the faithfulness of yearly meeting committees and staff has this year brought to resolution several longstanding concerns in our yearly meeting structure and budget that had been diverting considerable time and resources from our central mission.

How can we move beyond the self-imposed boundaries that divide us? How can we eliminate artificial divisions and labels, so that we can work together to do what we know is right? This calls for a courageous humility, a quality that helps us to remain open with others without asserting that we have the final truth. Safe spaces for dialogue allow parties with competing goals and agendas to find common ground and seek the truth together. Our hope for the work of the yearly meeting is a great hope. In humility and with divine guidance we partner with God in transforming the world.

On behalf of New England Friends,
Jacqueline Stillwell, Presiding Clerk