



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
OF FRIENDS
QUAKERS

The Epistle of the 362nd Annual Sessions of the New England Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

To all Friends everywhere:

From the 6th through the 11th day of the Eighth Month, 2022, Friends gathered at Castleton University, as well as by videoconferencing, to hold our Annual Sessions. We acknowledged that we met on unceded land of the Abenaki people, now known as Castleton, Vermont, and we heard from the chiefs of the four recognized Vermont Abenaki tribes. We gathered together for the purpose of creating a sense of community, worshiping together, doing business, and envisioning our future. Our theme for this year was, “This is the Hour: How does the Spirit find you?”

This year’s meeting has been our first since 2019 where some of us have been able to join together in one location. This was also our inaugural “hybrid” Sessions, which has incorporated both attenders at Castleton and attenders who have joined via videoconferencing. We were blessed to have 350 individuals registered to attend in Castleton, and 167 registrations for online participants, for a total of 517 attenders. This number included 70 youth of high school age or younger, and 33 Friends representing Quaker organizations or visiting from other yearly meetings, including from outside the United States, notably Belize, Bolivia, Cuba, Ireland, Kenya, and Mexico.

We were deeply grateful for the tremendous expertise, patience, and grace of our technical support team. We were also thankful for the team that allowed us to practice “language justice” by offering simultaneous translation into and out of Spanish.

We continued our practice of financially supporting the gathering using a “pay-as-led” approach, inviting all to attend regardless of financial means. Youth of high school age and younger were invited without charge. Our youth programs are still in the process of restoration after the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Numbers have been down significantly from where they were before. However, the young participants in the 2022 Sessions showed great energy and enthusiasm for the adventure of being together. Youth programs are clearly still vital.

In coming together at this year’s Sessions, we have had to rebuild a sense of community that has been damaged by years of pandemic-related separation, and by the assaults of

our unjust economic and social system on our sense of safety and connection. We had to ask each other: “How are you doing, Friends? What has been on your heart?” The leaders of our intergenerational opening celebration guided us in releasing the “Big Feelings” that we brought with us, creating a communal collage of them, in order to sink into clearness to listen and discern. This work continued during our intergenerational and interactive Plenary, led by Emily Provance, who engaged and united us through story and song, questions and discussions, emphasizing connection, love and mercy.

As we moved into doing the work of our Annual Sessions, Regina Renee Nyégbeh of Ujima Friends Meeting ministered to us daily, challenging us to engage with Bible verses which asked us about how we listen to and answer God’s call. Are we truly listening? Do we act on what we hear and are shown? Are we quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry? Are we aware that we can move too fast but also that we can move too slowly?

Throughout this gathering, we wrestled with the questions raised by our theme, “This is the Hour,” reflecting our sense of urgency about the enormous challenges that we and all of the world’s people face at this time: dismantling Empire, and healing the immense damage that it has caused, leading to racial, economic, and social injustice and the destruction of the planet.

As we engaged in the business of the Yearly Meeting, we realized that seeking God’s guidance and practicing obedience to the divine will is hard work for us. Our sense of urgency often leads us to reenact the ways of Empire. Humble listening was our way through. We strove to listen through the personal pain and experience of beloved Friends as we wrestled with numerous issues related to how our Yearly Meeting answers the call to promote racial, social, and economic justice.

The Noticing Patterns of Oppression and Faithfulness Group asked the whole body of Friends to take up the ministry of naming the patterns of oppression and faithfulness among us here at Sessions. Our Presiding Clerk made time for these noticings to be aired.

We addressed issues of right relationship with the indigenous peoples of our region and beyond. These included the distribution of our letter of apology to Native peoples of our region, the northeastern United States, and responding to the call to join the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. We were inspired by reports of Friends United Meeting ministries in Belize, Kenya, and Ramallah, Palestine, which are supported by NEYM and individual meetings and Friends. Friends have been both complicit in cultural imperialism and have taken part in building up lasting institutions and programs run by local people. We are humbled by the contrast. We were reminded that “America” means continents, not a country.

Our NEYM representatives to the Board of Friends United Meeting reported that the conversation with FUM over the discrimination against unmarried couples and those in same-gender relationships in their personnel policy is continuing. They report that trust is being built.

With regard to the NEYM *Faith and Practice* draft chapter on marriage, a listening session took place in which Friends openly discussed concerns about inclusion. One of the issues raised was a concern for the potential invisibility of people in committed polyamorous relationships. The Faith & Practice Committee responded with new language to this and other issues, and the chapter received its requested preliminary approval.

We felt a concern for the nurture of the spiritual life of Friends. In our continuing exploration of how to fulfill the work of Ministry and Counsel, we heard proposals for experimenting with support for ministry and eldering throughout the Yearly Meeting. We also want to support local meetings, and to evaluate the quarterly meeting structure.

New England Yearly Meeting celebrates its 30-year friendship with Cuba Yearly Meeting. Three Friends from NEYM were able to attend Cuba's Yearly Meeting sessions this spring and were warmly received. We were deeply moved by the sufferings currently experienced by Cuban Friends, and by Cubans as a whole.

As we deeply listened to these and other issues, we found God's grace swelling our hearts with love. We needed the insights, prayers, and gifts of everyone to seek and find unity on the ways forward.

Thank you, Friends, for your good listening to our condition. We are eager to hear from you about your own place in the great journey. Be blessed, always, with God's presence and love in all your work, and all your ways.

In Love,

Your Friends in New England Yearly Meeting
Bruce Neumann, Presiding Clerk