



Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Epistle **Approved, July 31, 2022**

Greetings to Friends Everywhere from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, seated on lands stewarded over the millenia by Lenni Lenape and other indigenous people who are still among us:

In late July 2022, we held our 342nd annual session over several days. In the face of a new wave of coronavirus Covid-19, for the third year we met virtually by Zoom. Again, we missed meeting face-to-face, hearing our children's voices and laughter, visiting each other over meals, and welcoming visitors in person with hugs and handshakes. However, most of us have become accustomed enough to computer-based conference platforms to appreciate that they bring in folks from far away, allow us to spell our names correctly, foster deep spiritual connections, practice fellowship in small groups, and even experience powerful and moving vocal ministry.

Our annual sessions officially began a month ago with events offering additional ways for gathering, learning, and celebrating the gifts of Friends and the love shared in our community. They also highlighted some of the challenging issues that shape our lives today. Both a pre-sessions retreat imagining a new future of racial equity (and moving forward towards that) and an opening plenary invited us to look at our current behaviors and set the stage for the future we wish to see.

This year's theme, **"We seek to repair broken foundations across the generations unified in our beloved Quaker community,"** was deeply and powerfully addressed by young adult Friend and performance artist Eppchez Yes in their keynote talk. Building on critical examinations of Penn's Treaty with the Lenni Lenape in 1682, the Germantown Declaration Against Slavery in 1688, and the 1969 call for reparations by the National Black Economic Development Conference, Eppchez discerned Quaker patterns of oppression, delay, and avoidance. We are challenged to examine, acknowledge, and repair these "harmingly-designed" foundational patterns and to face this critical work: "We are standing in the need of prayer, for the stakes are high."

We began each day with bible stories presented in Godly Play format, evoking wonder in many of us. Deep worship laid a foundation for informative and fruitful business sessions. In our work together it became clear that we cherish each other, trying our best to be supportive and helpful with one another even as we navigate profound disappointments and woundings.

Yearly Meeting financial stewardship appears in good hands on a sustainable basis, thanks to the work of a dedicated staff and Friends. We heard that our one historic property, the landmark 1804 Arch Street Meeting House, is becoming less of a burden as it develops its own funding support. We

heard reports on work being carried out in the areas of Yearly Meeting-wide actions approved last year: membership and belonging, addressing racism, and addressing global climate change.

Our General Secretary led us in an exercise to examine the meaning of shared corporate witness. The responsibility for addressing climate catastrophe and undoing racism doesn't lie with just two committees; instead it is the responsibility of each individual at every area of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting – taking acts of love and leaps of faith. We were reminded that the Yearly Meeting is all 10,000 of us scattered across the region in 100+ meeting communities, not just the staff or the Friends whose collaborative work has stewarded the concerns thus far.

An innovation this year was a chance for our quarterly meetings to report. We savored the variety of practice, vitality, and commitment to this historically important concept. Some of our quarterly and monthly meetings leverage their efforts by participating in local and regional interfaith networks. We also heard an informative report from Ujima Friends Meeting (founded in 2020) and the Ujima Friends Peace Center (2017), both established as active and vibrant outgrowths of the Fellowship of Friends of African Descent dedicated to “bearing witness to peace, justice, and love” in urban North Philadelphia.

We carefully considered and united with a minute of concern recommending a truth and healing commission at a federal level addressing the genocidal practice of boarding schools for indigenous youth in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Friends were actively involved with these schools, so we wish the full story to be known and documented and that appropriate apologies and reconciliation actions take place.

Our closing speakers broadened our awareness of exclusion and oppression by telling us about fostering accessibility and inclusion for those with physical and mental impairments. One speaker shared insights from the field of public philosophy, and the other explored ways to make electronic information sources as accessible as possible. Opening up access helps us all. The discussion afterwards illustrated how Quaker values of inclusiveness and fairness can be applied to contemporary technologies. Improved accessibility is a key part of the ongoing journey to fuller human rights.

There is a paradox in the decreasing number of active Friends -- and yet increasing enthusiasm among our monthly meetings for crafting and submitting Spiritual State of the Meeting Reports. We heard an inspiring and informative report from the recently named Climate Stewards. Meanwhile, antiracism work is occurring on many fronts even though, as a body here, we feel painfully blocked. In reflecting on a recent memorial service for a young and beloved Black Quaker shot in the street, our Ministry and Care Committee beseeched us: “As we are called out of worship, may we be called to actions in our communities, our meetings, our Nation, and the world.”

As our time together came to an end, we held an “All Together Worship” linking 300 Friends and 22 meetinghouses for deep and nourishing worship. Then we heard heartening reports for Friends General Conference (FGC), Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) Section of the Americas, Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW), and the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) on how they are effectively supporting Quakerism and addressing many of the pressing issues discussed here this week.

In closing, we cite Abington Meeting's minute about their leading for reparations. We learned from them that the pathway forward will be full of potholes, but the challenge is to keep going:

We wish to engage in racial reconciliation and healing through acknowledging, apologizing, and atoning for wrongs our Meeting has committed in the past that influence the present. . . . We wish to atone for these past oppressions and injustices in the hope of bringing healing through retrospective justice to African Americans and Indigenous Peoples.

-- Approved by Abington Monthly Meeting, Fifth Month 10, 2021

On behalf of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

Frank and Jean-Marie Prestwidge Barch
Presiding Co-clerks

[Attach Young Adult Friends' epistle here]