

To all Friends Everywhere:

Teacher, Jesus was asked in the passage from Matthew that formed the theme of the 2018 Wilmington Yearly Meeting, *which command in God's Law is the most important?* Jesus' divinely wise answer, we read, made love the linchpin for the law.

We opened our annual sessions with a presentation called *Voices of the Valley: Black Voices of a Company Town Called Alcoa, Tennessee*. This carefully researched one-act play told stories of Black Americans who were recruited from the Deep South to work in the hottest part of the aluminum plant in Alcoa. The stories conveyed a variety of emotion: laments for pain past and present, fond recollections of the strong Black community that developed in Alcoa, analyses of why that community is not as strong and united as it once was, and hopes for a compassionate and equitable future.

Similar themes marked our time together in Yearly Meeting sessions. We were reminded in our Bible studies with Patricia Thomas that we cannot love God without loving one another: these two commandments must hang together. Likewise our clerk, David Goff, called upon us to engage in business sessions while remembering the great commandment to love God and love one another as we have been loved by Jesus.

We gathered this year, in Maryville, Tennessee, knowing that at the rise of Yearly Meeting we would be diminished. Through the course of discussions over the year since our last annual sessions we have wrestled with the expressed desire of several Meetings to disaffiliate from the Yearly Meeting, their Quarterly Meeting, or both.

Our way forward during these sessions was laid out for us by a summary of the discussion that occurred at a joint meeting of our Executive Committee, Ministry and Counsel, and Permanent Board, held in Berea, Kentucky, on May 19, 2018:

...because there are Friends in our Yearly Meeting who cannot remain in fellowship with those holding other points of view related to scripture, it is time to consider moving toward separating peacefully and lovingly. If it's time to say goodbye to one another, then let's do it in love. If we cannot reconcile all opinions, let us endeavor to unite all hearts—by loving God and loving Jesus.

Even though we might want to focus on opportunities for fellowship and shared mission, perhaps it's time to address how we can separate in love, with kindness and blessing....

Therefore, the task that faced us this weekend was to love one another as best we could, through blessing the future work for Christ of those who chose or will choose to leave the Yearly Meeting, and affirming the bonds of fellowship between those who have chosen to remain.

As we considered, by turn, the requests of five Meetings to disaffiliate with the Yearly Meeting, we were covered by a spirit of love and humility. Mixed within that worshipful love for God and brotherly love for one another, however, was deep grieving. How do we reach an understanding of what has happened to us? What do we do with our shared history? How do we part ways with kindness, forbearance, and blessing? As one Friend said, "I want to grab you around the knees like a child grabs a parent and hold on to you, but this desire is out of love. I will not stand in your way."

During the initial discussion about the idea of disaffiliation, we were challenged several times to remember that disunity and division are tools of the Accuser of the Brethren. We were called to self-examination, to reflect on what spirits we are allowing to lead us, to repent and to turn toward love.

As John Jeremiah Edminster reminded us in our Friday night lecture on *The Everlasting Gospel Preached by George Fox*, "the big thing about living the self-surrendered life under the Cross is that Christ who calls us to it also empowers us to live it."

In the act of mourning our separation while blessing our disaffiliating Meetings, Friends surrendered our desire to lecture and judge, to make our own special points, to win over other Friends. We agreed that Biblical interpretation is at the heart of our uneasiness and distrust, and that we are not able to come to the same place in how we read the scriptures, or in how we view the autonomy of the Monthly Meetings and the authority of the Yearly Meeting. This is evidenced by our disagreement regarding the proper Christian understanding of marriage.

Both those remaining, and those disaffiliating, acknowledged that each group was acting with integrity, from a deeply-held commitment to faithfulness, striving to live the faith of Friends as they had learned it. Perhaps if we had been more surrendered to Christ's teaching, division could have been avoided. But there was also a strong sense among many that the long years in which we have waited but withheld trust, waited but avoided facing our disagreements, has drained life from our body, both in our individual congregations and corporately as the Yearly Meeting.

Those Meetings whose disaffiliation from Wilmington Yearly Meeting was approved include congregations from all three Quarterly Meetings. We pray for a successful future

in ministry for Cuba Friends Meeting, Friendsville Friends Meeting, Friends Church Nashville Preparatory Meeting, Hardins Creek Friends Church, and Rafter Chapel Friends Church. We also realize that there are several other Meetings which are in a discernment process regarding their own affiliations. We hope to maintain ties of friendship, and are open to future re-affiliation.

Our presiding clerk, David Goff, implored those who are leaving to commit themselves to finding fellowship and accountability within some other Friends body. Our rising clerk, JP Lund, committed himself, on behalf of the Yearly Meeting, to assist in any way possible those Meetings which desire to organize themselves into a separate body.

It was painful to watch some dear Friends, representatives of disaffiliated Meetings, walk out the door as we continued in business. We approved a minute on gun violence offered by Maryville Friends and encouraged our Meetings to distribute it widely, especially to their political representatives. We listened to a minute on the separation of refugee children from their families at our nation's borders by US immigration officials. We agreed to consider that minute, brought by Cincinnati Friends, when we next meet as a body, in the winter of 2019. We minuted our appreciation for David Goff and his leadership and compassion as our presiding clerk during these difficult three years.

In addition to the set business, we shared times of worship together that were deep and sweet. In our Memorial Meeting, we heard stories of farmers, teachers, Quaker leaders, and more; stories of Friends who bore faithful if disparate witness to the Light that redeems. We filled the meetingroom at Maryville with harmony in song, and talked about the commandment to love God and neighbor in our worship sharing groups. We also enjoyed the meal times and the free time in which we were able to converse with friends from near and far.

In our Peace Lecture on Saturday evening, we were reminded by visiting minister Eric Ginsburg that conflict is a necessary condition of our growth and creativity. "But when we relate to one another in a peacebuilding process, no one is seen as an adversary," he said. "Peace is a necessarily continuous process, not a state of being." He also reminded us that the door through which some walk away need not close, metaphorically, behind them. "There may be a time when Friends reach a different sense of clarity," he said. "I hope that the door will indeed remain open."

In the meantime—whether that meantime ends with reunification in this life or the perfected Bride of Christ in the next—gathered Friends have chosen to bless, rather than accuse; to call to repentance rather than condemn; to lovingly release and graciously depart rather than cast aside.

Over a hundred years ago, members of Wilmington Yearly Meeting founded a school in Puerto Padre, Cuba. In 1905, after a considerable fundraising effort, a cablegram was sent from Wilmington Yearly Meeting to Puerto Padre that read, “*Prepare to build – lot purchased.*” We have embarked on a new fundraising effort to help rebuild this school—called the Wilmington School—as a new community center for education and fellowship. Through the rise of sessions in 2019, we are saving loose change and planning donation dinners and hosting yard sales to raise as much money as possible and to strengthen our historic connection with Cuban Friends.

We find that we are also engaged, ourselves, in the work of rebuilding. In previous years, much of our energy has been spent avoiding conflict, managing conflict, and praying and working for resolution and transformation. Our sadness at saying goodbye to those who could not in good conscience stay is joined with our hope that we will continue to be shaped and conformed into the image of Christ, our Teacher and Lord.

Faithfully submitted,

The Epistle Committee of Wilmington Yearly Meeting

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