

To all Friends Everywhere,

At 11:02 am on August 9, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb above the city of Nagasaki. The bomb explosion destroyed an area of nearly five square miles, including, nearly at the explosion's epicenter, St. Mary's Cathedral, where mass was being held. The collapse of the cathedral buried all those present within its walls. Recently Wilmington College became aware that it held an important remnant from these events. A wooden cross removed from the rubble of the destroyed cathedral has been part of the Peace Resource Center's permanent collection since 1982.

St. Mary's Cathedral—also known as the Urikami Cathedral—was rebuilt in 1959. For many years, members of the Nagasaki Peace Association have looked for the cross, which was photographed intact in the rubble of the building shortly after the bombing. When Peace Resource Center director Tanya Maus learned of Nagasaki's interest in the cross, she made plans to return it to the Cathedral. On August 7, she and Campus Minister Nancy McCormick will present the cross to the Urikami congregation.

During our annual sessions, we were privileged to participate in a service of prayer blessing the Urikami cross and the congregation to which it will return. The cross seemed an apt symbol for both the Cathedral congregation and for Wilmington Yearly Meeting as well. The Christian cross is a symbol of both human and divine suffering caused by human brokenness, and it also symbolizes the new life that springs from places of vulnerability and pain. After the disaffiliations that have occurred within Wilmington Yearly Meeting over the last year—beginning at last year's annual sessions, and continuing throughout the year—our Yearly Meeting has experienced both death and rebirth.

We gathered for our Yearly Meeting retreat the day before annual sessions with the intention of reflecting on some lingering questions: what's next for the Yearly Meeting? What is our new normal? What does the new reality look like for us—for “the remnant,” to use the term and the theology which Mary Banner taught us during the first session of our retreat? During worship, Dale Hayes' message reminded us that Mark's accounting of the resurrection is a frightfully traumatizing and yet transformative possibility—one that, in its original form, leaves the listener alone with the question, “And then what?” Dale pointed out that we are in the same situation: as a people still processing the ending, we don't yet know what the resurrection looks like or how it begins.

Our theme for our sessions this year, taken from the prophet Jeremiah, became a constant refrain throughout our business and workshops: “For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” [Jer. 29:11] Though we could affirm the theme—that God has a plan to prosper and not to harm—we have not yet worked out together what that plan looks like.

We ask ourselves timeless queries: “What canst thou say? How does the truth prosper among you?” Yet we have no clearness about how to offer an answer to that question, or whether we should even attempt a corporate answer. Perhaps it is a question, instead, that we should commit to asking one another when we gather.

Katie Ubry-Terrell, who led our morning Bible study sessions, told a story about one of the Friends United Meeting Triennials that occurred when she was on the FUM staff. John Punshon was the keynote speaker at that gathering, and he challenged Friends to read the promise of Jeremiah 29:11 in its proper historical context: not as a warm and fuzzy sentiment, but as given to people who were

newly in captivity and who had every right to feel that they had been denied a hope and a future. Katie noted the irony that John's lecture was given before the present round of divisions among Yearly Meetings, but she insisted that the promise still remains true for us. She asked us to consider whether we are hopeful for the future of Friends, and what particular hopes we have for our own Yearly Meeting.

Kelly Kellum, General Secretary of Friends United Meeting, spoke at our USFW/QMI Banquet and shared stories of particular hope from throughout the beloved community of Friends United Meeting. He reminded us that while we may be tempted to reconcile ourselves to hopelessness in the face of conflict and the loss of past glories, hope yet abides within us and calls us to abundant life. As the Society of Friends and as individual faithful followers, whether in Nairobi or Ramallah or Belize City or Dar es Salaam or Knoxville or Wilmington, Friends are called to embody hope in hopeless situations and embrace hope as we consider our future.

As we listened to one another and considered our way forward, we found that we have many reasons for hope within our own history and our shared work. Our camping program at Quaker Knoll continues to be a beacon of fellowship and religious education, and we are experiencing a renewed energy to provide other youth activities throughout the year. We also do important work together through Friends Disaster Service, and by hosting times of fellowship that are meaningful spiritual and social experiences for many.

The Quaker Leader Scholars program at Wilmington College provides an avenue of outreach to young adults, and the college itself is an important mission of the Yearly Meeting: it was founded to educate the people of Southwest Ohio, and continues to change lives in this region. Through the recording process, we are also engaged in our own educational and mentoring project; our recent move

toward offering this education through public workshops makes the conversation available to those outside the formal recording process.

Perhaps the most powerful way in which we have recently felt called to pursue love and justice together has been in our fundraising for rebuilding the Wilmington School in Puerto Padre, Cuba. Through our combined efforts, we have raised at \$30,647 and some uncounted change. We have done this through a series of fundraisers organized by different Meetings, and by small donations of change collected in jars with slotted lids. No single contribution made all the difference, but many small contributions have become great.

Another celebration has been raising up ministers and welcoming new candidates into a streamlined training and recording process. One rising minister was accepted under the care of Training and Recording, and another has been scheduled for a clearness committee to enter the process, as the current candidates continue in their growth and learning. We see this as a hopeful sign for future ministries within our Yearly Meeting, a witness to our continued vitality and growth.

We also feel encouraged in the possibility of getting to know one another better by building deeper bonds of informal fellowship. In this past year, we have found it easier to be together in conversation and fellowship; we have found the necessary trust to follow with courage as we are led by the Spirit. We are also finding that familiarity with one another is a key component of trust. So we are encouraged by the leadership of Friends who feel called to facilitate intervisitation among us, and we recognize that as we remember one another, we re-member the body, learning from our differences as we take comfort in our similarities.

What else might we be called to do? Lonnie Valentine, Professor of Peace and Justice Studies at the Earlham School of Religion, summarized his Peace Lecture message with this opening advice: “Go deep within to seek the Spirit and how it leads you to what you and we are called to do. The Bible can help us listen to the Spirit. The marks of the Spirit will be strength and compassion. Clarity will come.”

Lonnie reminded us of the need to hold in creative tension the demands of love and justice. Sometimes when we want to love our neighbor, we do so by ignoring the demands of justice. And sometimes, when we allow grief and hurt to narrow our focus, no matter how right we may be in the details, we are apt to preach justice at the expense of attending to love. Lonnie also advised us that conversations among Friends with differing points of view are a preventative against creating God or peace or justice in our own image.

William Penn wrote, “True Godliness does not turn people out of the world but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it.” As a resurrection people, we remember that at our most broken and torn and inconstant, as we find ourselves sitting in the ashes, we are yet held in the constant and healing love of God and called to this mending work. Our next gathering as a Yearly Meeting is focusing on mending the world we find ourselves in, using Penn’s quote as our theme, and using as our scripture passage Micah 6:8 “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

In our concluding worship, we participated in a circle of blessing for 108 friendship dolls that will travel to Japan along with the Urikami cross. These dolls, inspired by the friendship dolls sent to Japan in 1927, were created by many persons in Wilmington Yearly Meeting and beyond, at the initiative of Wilmington College Campus Minister Nancy McCormick. The making of the dolls has provided opportunity for people to know each other better, and has also created a network

of relationships among people in the Yearly Meeting and people in Japan. Nancy and Tanya will be carrying them to Japan with the Urikami cross. They will be given to schoolchildren in Hirado and Nagasaki. Nancy described these dolls and the Urikami cross both as symbols representing peace, hope, new life, and power over evil—a mystery that stretches well beyond any of our individual experiences.

We pray that you are prospering in the truth and recognizing the love of Christ, and that you feel the blessing which comes from Jeremiah—that God knows the plans to give you hope and a future, though we presently peer through a glass darkly. We pray you are buoyed by faith, grounded in hope—and led by love.

Faithfully submitted,

The Epistle Committee of Wilmington Yearly Meeting
Jonathan Goff, Dan Kasztelan, Julie Rudd