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# THE EPISTLES

## REPORTED TO ANNUAL SESSION AT FREDERICK, MD

### 8TH MONTH 5TH DAY, 2018

To Friends Everywhere,

Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) gathered to consider the theme “Radical Listening, Rooted in Love.” Reverberations from last year’s tumultuous closing business meeting were felt throughout the year. During Interim Meetings, in committee work, in many local Meetings, Friends have sought to deepen their awareness of inherent bias in our life as a community and to develop strategies for growth and change. At this 347th Annual Session, echoing messages charge us to engage now in efforts to envision and build the Religious Society of Friends of the future.

Reports on several topics urged attention to changes in the world of Friends. At least 49 percent of all Friends are in East Africa. If we—those Quakers who identify as liberal and unprogrammed, the “vast minority” as former Friends United Meeting (FUM) General Secretary Colin Saxton said—are to be more than a “quaint” remnant of the Quaker Community, we must engage with intentionality. Pastoral practices and conservative values challenge us. Additional challenges will come from efforts at de-colonization and liberation from European-American economic, social, and cultural domination. In sum, “Expect discomfort,” was a key message, as Friends become involved with changes in the world of FUM taking place in East Africa, Ramallah, and the Caribbean as well as the United States. Originally a Western missionary organization, FUM is now committed to becoming a global partnership. In order for that commitment to come to be, “a structure of global participation and power-sharing” must be created. Unequal participants must become equal.

While U.S. participation and power will diminish, we must be able to relate to and work with Friends from other lands, speaking other languages, and worshipping in ways that differ from our own. Being prepared for such changes and being an active and vital part of these changes will involve the “radical listening” that is at the core of this week’s conversations. We must anticipate that our ability to consistently listen deeply will be tested. We will do well to consider the listening queries of the School of the Spirit shared at our retreat, such as “Do I offer an attentive, prayerful and quiet presence while a person is speaking?” and “Am I open to what is unfolding, letting go of my own ideas of what should happen?”

From Joyce Ajlouny, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) General Secretary, we heard: “Trust the voice of the oppressed. Radical transformation is possible with trust.” She described a “quiet, humble effort” undertaken by AFSC when seeking to address a problem by first gathering those affected—the dispossessed here and abroad—and by listening, then supporting their leadership in designing and working toward a new reality. In this way AFSC has worked in Myanmar with Rohingya, other Muslims and Buddhists to create safe places for refugees to stay in country, and helped farmers in North Korea to increase food security—the first western NGO to work in North Korea. A quote from AFSC, read in Business Meeting, reminds us that, “We are not a homogeneous organization seeking to become more diverse; we are an incomplete organization seeking to become whole.”

BYM has been actively engaging in concerns about moving toward wholeness through a unique process called Growing Diverse Leadership, supported by a grant from the Shoemaker Fund to further build diversity at our camps and across BYM as a whole. Our intention is to discern how our Meetings at all levels can be more inclusive and welcoming to all, can encourage participation and leadership among all Friends, and can build an anti-racist, multicultural community. How can we encourage and sustain participation by younger Friends and support their development as leaders? The commitment of Young Adult Friends to drive this growth was evident as they exhorted Friends to expand on this work, stating: “If we [in BYM] want to engage with young people, we must work with them on dismantling the implicit bias in our communities.”

One manifestation of these values and concerns has been the work of STRIDE Groups. The Strengthening Transformative Relationships in Diverse Environments (STRIDE) program initiated by young adult alumni of the BYM camping program has been building relationships in four urban communities and raising money for camp scholarships. This work has been intensive and ongoing. Group members have engaged with campers, families, and camp staff in a comprehensive cycle of communication, orientation, preparation, and feedback. The powerful, transformative nature of the STRIDE program both sparks anticipation for the future of Friends and encourages us to undertake the significant efforts required of us. Friends responded with passion and generosity.

In considering how to be welcoming, and attempting to assess how welcoming we truly are, one Friend of Color asserted that their experience shows we are not truly welcoming, that our words are welcoming, even our intentions, but not our structures and practices, and another Friend commented that saying we want to be welcoming is like saying we want to be Olympic athletes. Both require training. Another quoted a Friend of Color in their local meeting who pointed out, “You don’t know what diversity will look like, and you don’t know what it will ask.”

Colin Saxton in Friday evening’s Carey Lecture described what he called “seven postures for listening.” One of them in particular, “Lis-

tening as if we are written in one another's hearts," emphasizes the importance of seeing ourselves, Quakers, as "we," as a people of God, thus overriding our tendency to think of "me" rather than "we." He recommended that we recognize a coherent identity that we can invite others into.

From the floor of business meeting a Friend alerted us: "This is the future we're getting ready for, Friends, let's get ready for it wholeheartedly." Can we become the people we are meant to be by broadening our outreach, being more welcoming, being the people that new people would be attracted to? Our Spiritual State of the Meeting Report urges our engagement: "Things will only change when we seek change in ourselves."

## **EPISTLE OF YOUNG ADULT FRIENDS**

### **ACCEPTED 8TH MONTH 5TH DAY, 2018**

Young Adult Friends (YAFs) began the year disappointed and distressed following the Baltimore Yearly Meeting's (BYM's) 2017 Annual Session where Friends shied away from confronting racism within BYM. Our goal for the year was healing for members of our community and striving to improve. During the year, the YAFs attended a camping retreat, met for two conferences, and attended BYM's 347th Annual Session. During September 1st-3rd YAFs joined Sandy Spring Friends Meeting on their annual camping retreat on the grounds of Catoctin Quaker Camp. It rained consistently throughout the weekend. Despite the rain, Friends had fun gathering firewood, making cookies, and playing board games.

The winter conference took place at Sandy Spring Friends Meeting during December 15th-17th. On Friday, Friends arrived. Saturday morning YAFs started an ongoing conversation with BYM's Working Group on Racism. YAFs ate lunch out with Wayne Finegar, BYM's Associate General Secretary. After lunch we had a workshop with Friend's Committee on National Legislation (FCNL). Saturday evening we joined Sandy Spring for their simple meal and singing Christmas carols. Sunday morning we joined Sandy Spring for Meeting for Worship and their annual Christmas pageant. Joining Sandy Spring in their activities furthered our ongoing goal of engaging more deeply with the wider BYM community.

The summer conference took place at Stony Run Friends Meeting during June 1st-3rd. On Friday, Friends arrived and went grocery shopping for snacks and Saturday's breakfast. Throughout Saturday, Friends continued to arrive. Saturday morning, YAFs met again with the Working Group on Racism to continue our conversation, and plan a workshop for Annual Session. In the afternoon we met with Ken Stockbridge, BYM's Presiding Clerk, to discuss youth involvement within BYM in general as well as in YAF specifically. Saturday evening YAFs engaged in a massage workshop led by Sage Garrettson, herself a member of YAF.

Annual Session took place July 31st-August 5th at Hood College in Frederick, MD. On Tuesday, Friends arrived, went grocery shopping for snacks, and learned our unicorn names. On Wednesday some YAFs played capture the flag with the Young Friends (YFs). Later, YAFs joined in Intergenerational Plenary, a story told in the style of Faith & Play™. In the evening, YAFs participated in Produce Department, an event where Friends of all ages are invited to break into small groups in order to get to know each other better. Around midnight, YAFs shared a watermelon with the YFs. On Thursday, YAFs co-led a workshop with the Working Group on Racism. That evening, following tradition, YAFs left campus for dinner out. After dinner, YAFs organized a booth at the All Age Celebration, sharing the knowledge of unicorn names, and facilitating construction of personalized unicorn horns.

Friday of Annual Session, YAFs joined YFs for a spa day and ice cream. In the evening Produce Department met for a second session. After Produce Department, YAFs held business meeting and discussed our ongoing struggles with diversity in our community. Saturday YAFs met again with the Working Group on Racism with a focus on discerning actionable items for promoting diversity in the YAF community. In the evening, Friends gathered to enjoy the skits and performances of our annual talent show, Coffee House. After Coffee House, YAFs joined YFs for a dance party. On Sunday, YAFs held a business meeting during breakfast. Finally, YAFs joined all of BYM for closing worship and made our respective ways home.

Throughout the year, YAFs reaffirmed our need to do better to support Friends of Color. We committed to focus the 2018-19 year on creating change through direct action. As part of a racist society all of us have room to grow and change for the better. We do not shy away from committing ourselves to the noble cause of anti-racism. We are all racist. We must root out racial prejudice in us and hold in the light the daily work it will require.

## **EPISTLE OF YOUNG FRIENDS**

### **ACCEPTED 8TH MONTH 5TH DAY, 2018**

The 2017-2018 year for the Young Friends community was full of learning, fun, love and light.

Our first conference of the year was held at Goose Creek Monthly Meeting. Friends gathered and welcomed new members to the community. Then we enjoyed the outdoor space playing many fun games such as frisbee and wink. The Young Friends had a lovely workshop

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on body positivity and meditation. Later on in the conference, Friends gathered to discuss the important issue of how our Love Con was conducted in the past and how we will proceed with it in the future. Young Friends wrote a minute to address our concerns with Baltimore Yearly Meetings position on anti-racism. Friends gathered in a nearby field to play community inclusive games, such as Big Wind Blows and Look Down, Look Up. We ended our conference by joining in Worship with Goose Creek Members.

Young Friends second conference was held at Stony Run Monthly Meeting. Friends old and new joined together. We held an interesting workshop where we learned how to view other's opinions with respect and love to the people who hold them. Friends played in the play-ground area, and the whole community gathered for a game of Sardines. After we concluded our business meeting, Friends held a dance party that stretched on into the early morning. The next day, Young Friends held a thank you circle, and attended Meeting for Worship with Stony Run. Then Friends concluded our conference and left.

Young Friends gathered next at Sandy Springs Monthly Meeting in February. Friends attended an informative workshop where we learned where we fit in on the traditional Chinese elemental-personality group, and how that can affect our lives. We took advantage of the weather and frolicked in the snow on the beautiful grounds. Friends held a simple dinner. Then we held our first Annual Love-Con Prom, where we dressed up and enjoyed candy. Later in the conference, Friends gathered with Sandy Spring members for meeting for worship.

Young Friends' fourth conference of the year was held at The Clearing. Friends helped to clear out campsites and a trail on the property to help keep the grounds useable. Then a Friend invited the community to write messages onto a parachute to be displayed at climate marches. Due to the cold weather, we played many indoor games, such as board games and One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish, and had a pillow fight. Young Friends went on a relaxing walk through the woods. Then we held a thank you circle to conclude our conference.

Friends met for our final conference of the year at Hopewell Center. We played outside many times thanks to the great amount of space, including during the rainstorm. Then Young Friends held a coffee house where we saw many amazing talents. That night we went inside to hold our grad circles, a tradition where we celebrate each graduating senior. After that, we went outside to have a bonfire. To close out our conference, we held a thank you circle, and graduating seniors took home their senior books.

During 2018's Annual Session, Young friends came together for a week. We enjoyed many fun activities, such as watching a movie, playing foursquare, and having a dance party. We also held a workshop to make pillows for children separated from their parents, held two produce departments, attended the all age celebration, and the YPC visioning session. We also played capture the flag with JYM, went out to dinner as a group, and had a spa day with YAF's and ice-cream. On our last day we held a coffee house, and attended a workshop with FCNL.

## **EPISTLE OF JUNIOR YOUNG FRIENDS**

### **ACCEPTED 8TH MONTH 5TH DAY, 2018**

Good morning Friends,

The JYFs had an exciting time at Annual Sessions ranging from service projects to antics at the Marx center. This year the JYFs have made many new Friends, but also were saying goodbye to a few. The mystery JYF, Julian, came with a skateboard which intrigued most of us. On the first day when people got here we started out with mellow crayon melting art. But by the time evening program rolled around when most of the Friends had arrived we laid ground rules, and got to work playing Sardines.

These rules included Respecting our space, making adults aware of our location, leaving things in their intended shape, leave Jaguar Jake's pompoms alone, consent, and USE don't ABUSE.

The JYFs haven't quite adjusted to the new space, but the larger size allowed for more fun.

Jackrabbit Jake taught most of the willing JYFs how to throw cards. We were eager to begin testing these skills and while no one was permanently damaged there were some close calls.

By the next day card throwing was banned.

When the day rolled around we started off with a service project for a nearby soup kitchen. We created an assembly line rolling up silverware in napkins. Some JYFs figured out how to make the project more fun by wrapping 10 knives in one napkin. After lunch we followed the Catocin campers until they allowed us to play games with them, but we knew we had to save our energy because that night was the fabled capture the flag night with the YFs and JYMs.

The next day we sat down for business meeting where we re-wrote the rules, planned the sleepover, and chose our clerk and recording clerk. We prepared ourselves for the All Age Celebration, and discussed ideas for our first ever indoor pompom labyrinth. Before we

started work on the labyrinth we recognized we needed more help from a more experienced labyrinth. With help from a YF we finished the labyrinth just in the nick of time.

Friday morning started off with another service project, making pillows for separated immigrant families, but quickly descended into chaos as we went swimming in the rain... in an indoor pool. The overnight started with group games, singing happy birthday to Ally, and then running to Produce in the rain. When we returned to the Marx center completely soaked, we attempted to get ready for bed but nobody had toothbrushes or pajamas. So we started the movie and fell asleep.

The JYFs were excited to be here at Annual Sessions and we hope all of you were too, thanks for hosting us, bringing us here, and thanks to the staff who put up with us for a week,

All the friends at JYF

## **EPISTLE OF 2018 WOMEN'S RETREAT**

God Delights in Diversity

Baltimore Year Meeting Women's Retreat 2018

To Friends Everywhere:

It seems like talk of race and racism, and sex, gender, and sexism, and love, and phobias surround us. We, as humans, are daily deluged by both our touching compassion and our stunning hatred. In a time of constant conversations, so often divisive, enraging, and wearying we remember both the power of the word and the power of silence and stillness. Intentional language can be spiritually transformative, especially when embodied in action.

Saturday's plenary panel powerfully addressed issues around diversity. Their authentic voices were heard with gratitude and opened hearts. Some Friends wished there had been a transgender representative on the panel, but overall we were delighted by our panelists Kathryn Pettus, Elaine Brigham, Becca Bacon, and Dyresha Harris. We experienced a variety of deep thoughts and emotions on so many levels. Although we are innately programmed to see and distinguish variation, scientifically we are one. Race is a myth; however, racism is real. A Friend encouraged us to embrace our many identities to expand our perspectives. Delighting in our differences, and dancing with them, can make us more whole—as individuals and as a culture.

Our weekend offered many opportunities for connecting and intimacy. An impromptu sing-em-up broke out in the turret during the Saturday afternoon break, as well as a raucous intergenerational game of cards in the evening. We met three times in worship sharing groups to practice listening to the heart. This is a deeply anchoring practice for many. Friends enjoyed workshops around transitioning our perceptions of gender, sexuality, racial identity, judgement, and other life challenges. And, as usual, chanting was a highlight for many. Coffee House offered a chance for us to frolic joyfully and to support each other's gifts. The art room displayed many beautiful crafts for sale as well as materials to create new works. Folks also enjoyed a book exchange.

Some, mostly younger, women came for the first time, drawn by the deep conversation that the Yearly Meeting has chosen to embrace. We were excited to experience their energy and hope many will return. Women often express that this weekend nourishes them spiritually for the coming year. It was noticed that some of our older, founding members were not here this weekend. We miss them and honor their contribution in establishing this gathering. This year's difficult flu season also kept several Friends from attending.

Pearlstone welcomed us lovingly to their beautiful community. We found the food both very good and plentiful. Important as it is to nourish our minds and spirits with insightful discussions and warm friendship, it is equally important to nurture our bodies with beautiful food and the healing sanctuary of a good bed. Pearlstone provided this material bounty and we are profoundly grateful. We thank the women of Sandy Spring Meeting for organizing the weekend. We take away the blessings of a weekend shared in community and growth.

With Light and Love,  
The Baltimore Yearly Meeting Women's Retreat