

Northern Yearly Meeting Epistle 2017

With gratitude for our time together we send greetings to Friends everywhere from the 2017 Annual Session of Northern Yearly Meeting held May 26-29, at the Lions Camp in Rosholt, WI. Two hundred forty-nine of us, including 52 children and youth, took part in our worship, business meetings, children and youth programs, workshops, interest groups and play.

Our theme, “Moving Forward: Having Difficult Conversations About Diversity”, was explored throughout the weekend. An intergenerational event on Friday evening focused on getting to know ourselves and each other. Recognizing that diversity exists across many dimensions, we were challenged to consider the assumptions we make about each other. Our Saturday plenary urged us to go deeper in exploring our implicit biases. We found it refreshing to have high schoolers and young adults take leadership roles. We also expanded opportunities for worship sharing throughout each day with queries focused on culture, identity and the challenges of discussing racial equity in our Meetings.

Our children and youth engaged deeply with our theme. The high schoolers thoughtfully explored the nuances of violence and their responses to it and then brought queries about non-violence to the middle schoolers. The middle school group considered the question ‘who is your neighbor’ and how to communicate across differences. The older elementary group engaged in an interview and photo project uncovering attitudes and perceptions about racism among those attending Annual Session. Friends who travelled to El Salvador with photos and video clips from last year’s early elementary group brought messages back to this year’s group, helping these children to see their connection to the Quaker youth of El Salvador. Our preschoolers filled in outlines of their bodies with pictures of their favorite things and then used those to explore their differences and similarities. Children of many ages modelled inclusiveness through seemingly endless tag games of ‘Everybody’s It’. Many adults were moved by the work of leaders and volunteers in the children and youth program. Their gifts nurture values that we hope our children will carry out into the world.

In Meeting for Business we recognized movement in our midst resulting from work that often involved difficult conversations. We were pleased to hear that FGC is moving forward with an institutional assessment of racism and we followed through on our commitment to financially support this project. We look forward to hearing more about the process and results of this assessment and applying these to our own yearly meeting and monthly meetings. We approved a letter to El Salvador Yearly Meeting inviting conversation about where God is leading the relationship between our Yearly Meetings. We heard with great excitement that three Friends Meetings in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area will sponsor a new Quaker Voluntary Service program in the Twin Cities starting in 2018. And we celebrated the long-awaited publication of our new *Faith and Practice*.

While the theme called us to change how we engage each other around diversity, we maintained traditions that allowed us to play and to nourish each other: swimming, hiking, biking and boating during the day; singing, dancing, playing cards and board games at night. We found joy in the renewal of old friendships and in the beginning of new ones.

In our plenaries we were encouraged to make sure that our engagement with difficult conversations does not end with this Annual Session. Many Friends present shared their leadings to engage in new conversations in the wider world through current and newly forming FCNL advocacy teams and other forms of activism. We heed the words from *Courageous Conversations About Race* to stay engaged, expect discomfort, speak our truth and expect and accept non-closure. We acknowledge our lack of experience and our need to develop skills to maintain this process. This is not the work of some; it is the work of all. As our children would exclaim, “Everybody’s It”.

-Shel Gross, Nancy Newman, Julia Isaacs