

28 July 2016

Jesus Christ “made known to us the mystery of his will...to bring all things together in heaven and one earth together under one head, even Christ.” Ephesians 1:10

To All Friends Everywhere:

We send you our love in Christ from the campus of George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon, USA, where we gathered with a mixture of trepidation and hope over the issues facing us during our 124th Annual Sessions. We gathered this year from our home Meetings in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, and welcomed visitors from such remote places as Moscow Friends Meeting (Russia), Rwanda, and North Pacific Yearly Meeting.

Holding the tensions of our current discussions, we were addressed in our opening session by Retha McCutchen, our Interim Superintendent, who reminded us of Jesus's prayer in John 17. In light of our current broken world and our commission to go forth and make disciples, Retha pointed out His specific intercession for the disciples: protection, sanctification, and unity. Retha cautioned us, as we approached our week of business together, to heed the Proverb that names "discord sown among brothers" as something God abhors (Proverbs 6:19).

Our gathering theme is "Christ Plays in 10,000 Places", and our guest speaker, Miriam Adeney, spoke to us for three nights from the book of Ephesians. Emphasizing the unity made possible in Jesus, she told us stories of the work of faithful and faith-filled women and men who, reached by and responding to the gospel of God, poured their lives into their communities, bringing hope and justice.

During the afternoons we attended workshops and, for many of us, Board meetings. This year two of our biblical scholars, Paul Anderson and Howard Macy, taught a series of six workshops on the theme of human sexuality, starting with how we shape these difficult conversations, moving to the biblical teachings and their context in the Old and New Testaments, and then to ways we can welcome and show love to LGBT persons. Other workshops featured our Friends who minister in or traveled to other countries (Russia, Ramallah, China, Bolivia) and various ways to steward our resources, nurture our congregations, and strengthen our testimonies.

From the 6:30 a.m. Unprogrammed Meeting for Worship, through blessings over meals and Meeting for Worship for Business, with spontaneous moments where conversations ceased and Friends joined hearts and hands to pray, and into the late night hours, this gathering has been bathed in and supported by our prayers. Will they be enough? Of course the answer is no -- all these prayers and all this love we have for one another, that we offer to our beloved God, are like trying to make a few rolls and a tin of sardines feed 5,000 hungry souls. And of course the answer is YES, if Christ will accept our meager offering, which is indeed the very best we have to give, and will give the increase.

Our business this year, in addition to hearing from our Boards and the work being done among and by us, was largely devoted to two very important issues.

We approved a document titled “Mandatory Minimums: Child Protection and Abuse Prevention,” which was prepared by the Administrative Council, Elders and legal counsel, as a revision to Faith and Practice. We expect our churches to adopt and implement these standards as a matter of highest priority, in order to keep children and disabled adults safe from abuse, or to intervene early if abuse is

detected. We strongly encourage other yearly meetings to adopt these strategies. You can find our new guidelines, our more detailed procedures, and links to training videos on the Northwest Yearly Meeting website, www.nwfriends.org.

We also labored over a decision reached a year ago by our Board of Elders to release one of our churches from the Yearly Meeting over noncompliance with Faith and Practice. The decision was appealed to the Administrative Council by several other churches. The Administrative Council, after months of discernment, was unable to reach unity. The Elders' report was brought to the floor for further discussion. We set aside hours of our time together to hear from each other, to listen deeply, with the eager expectation and hope that the Holy Spirit would show the way for us to proceed.

It is difficult to admit, but we remain a divided community. Our Clerk of Elders, Ken Redford, expressed his sense that our deepest division is not so much over a point of doctrine, or our view of Scripture, or our understanding of what constitutes healthy sexuality, or our view of Faith & Practice, but between those of us who can accept these differences while maintaining integrity and those who feel that such differences subvert integrity. After long hours of listening to one another, the decision was made that we do not have consensus and that the discussion regarding approval or disapproval of the Elders' report would be handed to the Council of Representatives with the addition of youth appointed to represent each of the areas of our yearly meeting.

In spite of our inability to come to unity on one of our items for business, we heard voices from unexpected points in our meetings calling us to unity: in spontaneous open worship following the evening speaker, during a financial report, and in a testimony from a newly recorded minister among us who reported Jesus clearly speaking to her, "If you do not love my people, you cannot love me."

The following quotes provide glimpses into the heart of our time together.

"When things get rotten, give thanks. The enemy hates it when we do that."
(Brad Holton, presiding clerk NWYM)

"Yearly meeting assets are not counted in buildings and bank accounts but in people and ministry infrastructure which those people use as launch points in to ministry to their communities."
(Roger Watson, Treasurer NWYM)

"Reconciliation happens when we choose trust and courage over fear."
"Live every day as a healed woman without fear."
(Alice Maxson, newly recorded minister NWYM)

"The problems we face are big and urgent and we may feel as if we are standing at the edge of all we know. However, if we have faith and trust in our leadings, when we take the next step together, either we will find earth under our feet or God will give us wings." from Britain YM epistle, 2016

Friends, please hold us in the Light as we continue to struggle to find God's peace and unity in our life together.

Brad Holton, Presiding Clerk