

Baltimore Yearly Meeting

of the Religious Society of Friends
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REPORTED TO ANNUAL SESSION 2020 9TH MONTH 26TH DAY, 2020

To Friends Everywhere,

Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) started our 349th year together as we gathered in Spirit electronically for annual sessions following the theme “Courage, Faith and Hope to Love Across our Differences.” In this virtual format, we found new ways to connect deeply with Friends who joined us from nearby towns and from thousands of miles away. Entering Meeting for Business in silence, with microphones muted, encouraged deep worship. Even as we grappled with technical challenges, we found Spirit in small groups for bible study, worship sharing, and play. We celebrated that Friends of Color created new daily gatherings during this annual session that included Friends from unprogrammed and programmed meetings within and outside Baltimore Yearly Meeting. Unstructured gatherings at lunchtime and at the rise of Meeting captured some of the serendipity of encountering Friends on campus. We delighted in the community found by our youngest Friends, but sorrowed that our high-school Friends were not able to join us. Our time together has re-immersed us in the richness of our BYM community and given us the strength to continue our quest to love across our differences.

Our opening retreat was a safe space to share our grief, pain, confusion, and hopes. We acknowledged we are living in a perilous time of five pandemics, causing dis-ease and death worldwide: Covid-19, racism and bigotry, police brutality and militarization, climate change, and extreme economic inequity. Margaret Benefiel described this as the liminal space of the in-between times: what was normal is gone and the new normal has not yet emerged. We hold her advice to us: that we stay grounded through daily personal spiritual practice; that the hard work of being in community is itself a spiritual practice; and that community is fundamental to discernment as we ask, “What is mine to do? What is ours to do?”

Together, we seek the courage to stand in this ambiguity, attempting to respond faithfully to the Light we have, listening and discerning, moving step by step. We have long opposed racial injustice in the wider society. Last year we declared that we aspire to be an anti-racist faith community. As we looked back over this first year, we reviewed our good faith efforts and acknowledged some recent failings. Friends shared experiences of deep wounding related to racial power dynamics among BYM Friends. White Friends are still becoming aware that they must face their own complicity with the powers and principalities of racism and white supremacy: not only the transgressions in our imperfect Quaker history, but also continuing transgressions in the present moment. A Friend of color expressed pain that while some White Friends acknowledge the difficult work before us, others are reluctant to talk; their hearts are not open. In this liminal time, Friends diverge widely in understanding our individual and corporate roles in the pain of racial injustice, yet we know that failing to act is still action nonetheless.

As we wrestled with this work, we acknowledged our strength and fragility and our need for both courage and faith. Our clerk ministered to us about our tendency to recoil from conflicts within our Yearly Meeting. He suggested that this grows out of our association of anger with violence. He named that we

are in conflict over misunderstandings that occurred during the urgent financial crisis faced this year. He acknowledged pain, frustration and anger among BYM Friends and our staff. We heard in our opening plenary that the blessed community we yearn to create requires us to move past logic and rational thought and into contemplative awareness. We know that our faith is shown by our works. When we have the courage to abide in discord, we can break open our hearts, hear each other's anger, and feel each other's pain.

What is ours to do is grounded in our relationship with each other. Our work is not just making decisions, but the act of "being" a yearly meeting. Being in conflict in community takes on an aspect of holiness because we labor together, as if "together" is the only option. Community builds hope and, like courage, hope is contagious. Our hope that Baltimore Yearly Meeting will in time be a truly just religious community sustains us in this work. Many Friends have voiced a prophetic message that forgiveness and repentance requires us to change course. Our newly-formed Reparations Action Working Group has opened consideration of a Truth and Reconciliation process. We are sitting with the recognition that just as Zacchaeus' first act upon repentance was to pay reparations, we may also be so led. We also aspire to be accessible to a wider community of Friends. As we work together to ensure the future of our yearly meeting, we hope that this year's experiments with pay-as-led and with gathering online will prove viable so that we can welcome Friends from all income levels, locations, and digital access.

We closed our week together with the Carey lecture where Bridget Moix asked us, "What is Ending? What is Essential? What is Eternal?" As the old order ends, we stand in the Refiner's Fire, experiencing the searing, searching Light as we seek Way forward.

Our history as a loving community is long and deep. We enter our 349th year together enriched and emboldened to love each other and all people across our differences. Our work is grounded in courage and sustained by faith. Our time together nurtures the hope that this love will yet lead us to the beloved community.

In the Light,
Friends of Baltimore Yearly Meeting

**EPISTLE OF YOUNG ADULT FRIENDS
ACCEPTED 9TH MONTH 26TH DAY, 2020**

Theme: Self and Community Care

Please note: This year, Baltimore Yearly Meeting Young Adult Friends (BYM YAF) would like to recognize that there are Young Adult Friends (YAF) groups at a number of BYM meetings that organize activities and conduct business independent from BYM YAF; much as the individual meetings of BYM operate independent of the Yearly Meeting. Just as the Yearly Meeting accepts epistles from each of its Monthly Meetings, BYM YAF would like to recognize the work and worship of these vibrant young adult communities. This year, Friends Meeting of Washington YAFs (FMW YAF) are the only contributing group, but we know of (and hope to include) other YAF groups within the BYM area.

This year, the BYM YAFs started talking with BYM about becoming a more stable and sustainable worshipping community, introduced a wildly-successful platform for communicating with each other in

between our in-person conferences (and seven months of pandemic-enforced Zoom calls), conducted more business and watched each other eat more dinners than we have in the last several years combined, and continued in our labor towards becoming an intersectional and anti-racist faith community.

Winter Conference

BYM YAFs only managed to hold one conference over 2019-2020, instead of our normal two. It took place the weekend of January 3rd-5th, 2020 in College Park, MD. Over the weekend, YAFs took a break from three years of anti-racism centered workshops and discussions by spending some time discerning where we, as a worshipping community of BYM, are heading; and attempted to play a rather tongue-in-cheek tabletop role-playing game (which quickly devolved into a humorous dramatic reading of the game manual). Several YAFs from Friends Meeting of Washington joined us for the weekend, and their contributions to our meetings for business and our workshops re-kindled our desire to work more closely with each other.

The main workshop for the conference was a discussion with Rep Pickard and Melanie Giord from BYM's Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee about our desire for BYM YAF to function more like a monthly meeting. For many of the YAFs in attendance, BYM YAF is their primary spiritual home within the Yearly Meeting; and we want to be sure that those Friends are not deprived of (or unfamiliar with) the sustainable structure of a regular meeting. Rep and Melanie helped us begin to feel out which parts of the monthly meeting recipe are things we want to adopt, and which parts won't work for us or aren't relevant. Spirited conversation sprung up around topics such as marriage, writing a spiritual state of the meeting, and drafting a handbook or faith and practice document for the use of future YAFs. Those present were keenly aware that unlike most meetings, BYM YAF is intrinsically a transient community, and that we will need to tailor any monthly meeting practices we adopt to reflect that.

Discussions throughout the weekend helped Friends from FMW become acquainted with YAFs connected to BYM from other Programs, and share their feelings of the need to “bridge the gap” between Monthly Meeting YAFs and the Yearly Meeting Program for YAFs. Over the years Baltimore Yearly Meeting Young Adult Friends has drifted to become separate from the Young Adult Friends group of Friends Meeting of Washington. This drifting is the result of geographic and cultural differences between Friends. Efforts are being made to bridge this gap. Though time has widened the gap, we remain committed to the process of reintegration. We hope to strengthen the Friendship that exists between the Friends of FMW YAFs and BYM YAFs and we will continue our work to unite the young adults throughout the Yearly Meeting. This also involved the idea of aging out of YAF, as FMW YAF and BYM YAF have different customs in place. BYM YAFs have a strict cutoff at 35, matching the common definition of a Young Adult Friend, while the FMW handbook describes Young Adult Friends as old as “approximately 40”. This will be a discussion that we will continue to have.

More effective social media and email connection was successfully established between BYM's 2019 Annual Session and the Winter Conference, through some trial and error and a lot of input and cooperative planning. This caused connection to be easier to maintain throughout 2019 and 2020, even as our Summer 2020 conference was not able to proceed as planned.

Pandemic Pandemonium

Many Young Adult Friends are comfortable online. Our reality is often a stew of in-person and virtual interactions, with smiles and love sent over the internet just as much as face to face, if not more, even

before the pandemic. One would think that a transition to an entirely virtual life would be easy, or at least easier. COVID-19 made us very aware how important every ingredient was to our specific recipe.

BYM YAFs were fortunate to already have existing communications platforms set up that worked well for the new form our community needed to take. We have long relied on social media to remain connected with each other due to our geographic diversity, which made the transition to online Meetings for Worship and Business much smoother. Our Discord (a community focused communications platform) group grew from a few channels of communication to now nearly 20. We grew from a single person managing our server to having several moderators and a committee to support them. We learned in real time how to transition a platform from a secondary resource to a primary one.

We also started meeting frequently over Zoom to conduct business, provide company and support, and share the creative ways we endured the quarantine life. Our YAF 'n Craft sessions (held every Friday or Saturday evening) turned into a place to let out frustration and turn it into something positive. We learned a lot from each other during these sessions; things ranging from crochet stitches to giant-weaving-machine programming.

We also tackled difficult community issues, such as the age at which YAFs age-out, how to balance our desire to effectively advertise our online spaces to other (as yet unconnected) YAFs with the need to maintain the safety of those spaces, and whether or not YAF should be able to declare participating Friends to be Members of our community. Although we were not able to reach unity on all of these, the conversations themselves were focused. Our more frequent meetings helped keep our collective attention from wandering which allowed for substantial progress on difficult topics. We also discovered that assigning committees and working groups to season issues worked far better using our Discord server, which lets committee members share thoughts and ideas as they arise.

Journey Towards Being an Anti-Racist Community

This year YAF continued to struggle with increasing awareness of white privilege, harm, and the suffocating atmosphere that minorities continue to live with. Current events have made the need for this work all the more obvious. BYM YAF sees the declaration of BYM's intent to become an anti-racist community as a promise made to Friends of Color; one that it has become clear we have not been pursuing with the dedication and seriousness these Friends deserve. Instead, we have come to feel that Friends within BYM are more concerned about preserving the positive self-images of our white Friends than they are about confronting behaviors and practices that harm and exclude Friends of Color. While we have seen a great expansion of important dialogue on anti-racism within BYM, we have also sat in committee meetings where not making someone feel bad was of equal concern with re-shaping our community into a place where people of color actually have a seat at the table. We grow tired of having to explain that the floor being scratched or paint chipped doesn't matter if we truly make more spots. And if the table no longer serves the community, how do we make one anew, stronger and larger than ever before, where no one will find spaces lacking?

All the while we must continually remind each other that our own work is not done. Declaring that we wish to become anti-racist is only the first step. Our experiences with the wider BYM community in the past year have made it clear to BYM YAF that not all Friends are willing to see that we all have more to do. Friends of Color still have to contend with a legacy of subtle and overt racism. The forums for sharing their pain are full of unspoken rules, where messages only matter if they are shared in the 'right' way. At the same time, decades of clear lessons white Friends have been given about how to pursue anti-racism

are ignored. All too often, the recitation of a white Friend's anti-racist resume is used to excuse and deny behavior that victimizes our Friends of Color, twisting opportunities for spirit-led self-improvement into wasted hours of self-serving autobiographies that deny us any true progress towards our goal of anti-racism.

While there have been the timid forward steps of an organization unwilling to be bathed in the white-centered Light of our guilt, BYM YAF is concerned that if white Friends continue to resist having their past and present failings laid bare, we will forever be stuck taking baby-steps toward anti-racism. The spirit has driven us to re-examine our actions today and, in doing so, provide a safe seat at our table for Friends of Color to join us.

In the Light,
Baltimore Yearly Meeting
Young Adult Friends

Addendum to the Epistle

Friends Meeting of Washington Young Adult Friends

The COVID-19 Pandemic and ensuing lockdown deeply affected the FMW YAF community as well. Though we are not unique in having our lives disrupted by COVID-19, the disruptions have affected our lives in unique ways. Though many FMW YAFs live with roommates or in group homes, there are some who live alone and are experiencing greater isolation than other members of the community who live with their families. Many FMW YAFs are also in the group that splits time between the Washington, DC area and a family home somewhere else. The inability to travel easily to see parents and siblings has been a unique challenge for FMW YAFs. The economic uncertainty that has resulted from COVID-19 has also hit FMW YAFs differently than other members of the community. The economic hardship has hit our Meeting particularly hard. FMW YAF has done its best to be good stewards of our community and has donated as a group and individually to help support our Meeting community. The many disruptions that COVID has brought to our lives has led to a deeper commitment to our Meeting life and a greater reliance on the spiritual and social activities provided by our FMW YAF community.

Before the COVID-19 lockdown, FMW YAF had weekly bible studies, monthly potlucks, game nights, and this year had a very successful Friendsgiving and Quakemas Murder Mystery Party and gift exchange. Since the COVID-19 lockdown, FMW YAF has transitioned many of our normal activities to Zoom. We have transitioned from doing monthly potlucks to weekly Zimmers (Zoom dinners). Many FMW YAFs have found these Zimmers to be a valuable part of coping with the social isolation that comes from the lockdown. We have also transitioned the FMW YAF sponsored bible study to Zoom. Attendance at the bible study has increased since the beginning of the lockdown as many are seeking increased spiritual guidance during this time. We have also been able to easily accommodate FMW YAFs who have moved out of the area to come to these events due to their virtual nature. It has been great to see the old F/friends can still lean on the FMW YAF community for support. These weekly events have helped to break up the monotony of the week and keep us grounded during this time.

We are getting through this because we are doing it together. We have been able to support each other through the shared joys and sorrows of this time. Though as individuals this outbreak may have been overwhelming, because we have been there for each other we have been able to withstand it.

In the Light,
Young Adult Friends
Friends Meeting of Washington

EPISTLE OF YOUNG FRIENDS
ACCEPTED 8TH MONTH 1ST DAY, 2020

The Young Friends held our first conference of the year at Stony Run Friends Meeting. September Con is always a wonderful combination of reuniting with old friends and making new ones. To introduce the incoming class of Freshman into our community, we held Con 101, a place to learn our guidelines and expectations, as well as how our self-governing community functions. Friends attended a lovely workshop, where we learned to find and better express our voices. Our Business meetings at this con were productive and further served to teach our self-governing process to new members of our community. Saturday night we played a game of sardines in the dark before heading inside for a dance party. Sunday morning, we woke up early to clean before joining Stony Run Friends in worship. We thank the Stony Run community for granting us the use of their Meeting.

In November we met for our next conference at Friends Meeting of Washington. Our workshop at this conference was an insightful look on the history and current societies of Native Americans. Our community also enjoyed a field trip to a local playground where we played community bonding games. To celebrate the winter season, we made gingerbread houses in our Color Groups before gathering for Business. After our Business Meeting we had another dance party till the early morning, before waking to clean the meeting house and gather in worship with Friends Meeting of Washington. We thank Friends for allowing us to gather in your space.

For our third Conference of the year we gathered at Adelphi, for our February conference. We enjoyed several Valentine's day games. Young Friends then attended a workshop on sexual health and education, an important topic for our age group. After our Business Meeting, we held our annual Prom and once again danced into the early morning. Sunday morning it was time to clean up and say goodbye, but not before joining Adelphi Friends for Worship. We are deeply grateful to Adelphi Friends for opening their doors to our community.

Our Service con was sadly canceled due to Covid-19, and our Grad con was moved to an online format to maintain the safety of our community and the wider Friends Community. We were still able to organize a community online bonding session, before holding our Senior Circles for the graduating class. We hold them in the light for the disruption to their senior years but hope that our online substitutes for Senior circles and books helped to bring some semblance of normalcy to these trying times. The class of 2020 will be missed in our community, but we look forward to seeing them all prosper as the light leads the way forward in their lives.

We would also like to take the time to thank Gunpowder Friends Meeting and Sandy Spring Friends Meeting for planning to allow us into their meetings for our Service and Grad cons respectively. While we were not able to hold in person conferences and connect with your communities this year, we hope to carry over our plans and hold conferences with these Friends in the 20-21 year. That being said, our community is placing the safety of all Friends at the forefront of our considerations this year, and will evaluate the risk level before each con. We plan to make all arrangements for cons in the hope that the Light will shine on positive circumstances, but we will pay close attention to the situations and cancel conferences if it keeps Friends safe.

Lastly, our community is saying goodbye to another loved member this year. Jocelyn Dowling has served as the Youth Programs Manager for 6 years now, and she has changed the lives of many Young Friends. Our community is self-governed, but it is Jossie's presence that helps maintain and advance that state. She worked tirelessly to assist Young Friends in our work, while also being an incredibly fun and welcoming presence that brought love and light to every con. We cannot say thank you enough for all of the work she put in to help us, for how many of us she helped and for all the fond memories we will hold onto. While it is sad to see her leave, we know that the light will lead her way forward to bigger and better things, and we will be cheering her on the whole way.

This has been a difficult year for all Friends, but those of us in high school have gone through an incredibly difficult level of change. We had to cancel two conferences this year, and for Young Friends our conferences are an important place to be ourselves and feel accepted. It has always been the support of the meetings that open their doors to us and the wider BYM community that allows the Young Friends community to grow and prosper. We thank you all for this support, and hope that we are able to work together to maintain the Young Friends Community in these times. We hope you all stay safe and healthy.

Love and Light,
Young Friends

EPISTLE OF 2020 WOMEN'S RETREAT

February 8, 2020

Greetings to Friends Everywhere,

More than 170 women from as far away as Australia gathered at Pearlstone Retreat Center in Reisterstown, Maryland from February 7-9 for the annual Baltimore Yearly Meeting Women's Retreat to explore the theme of "Diligence in love, Overcoming isolation."

Old and young came ready to learn from each other, and hold each other up during different seasons of their lives. Women shared their gifts in varying ministries, facilitating workshops, participating in the planning, in ways that enriches ours and the larger community. Our time together refreshed our souls: combining listening, speaking, reflecting, crying and laughing.

With exuberance, we sang rounds and chants, traditional and playful tunes, knowing that no one judged our voices—that God heard us and that every voice contributed to the harmonies that will see us through the remaining winter and nourish us throughout the year. Where God is, is holy Ground, and as Quakers we know that this can be anywhere we gather together, or anyplace that we can live deeply attuned to that of the divine in others.

We were nurtured in so many ways. Women shared their wisdom and talents in workshops and the coffee house. In order to deeply explore our theme, we focused on queries during various forms of worship sharing groups: traditional, walking, yoga, and singing, Experiment with the Light. We were renewed by health practitioners at the Healing Center. We enjoyed delicious kosher meals that included vegetables grown on this sustainable working farm/retreat center. We visited baby goats born on the grounds of the Center, a harbinger of spring and symbol of renewal.

Friends in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia

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In her multi-sensory keynote address, Dr. Tonya Thames Taylor of Fallowfield Friends Meeting, from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, shared her experience of growing up in Mississippi and rich stories of ancestors who struggled to survive. She discussed iconography and language, and how constructs differ from person to person and culture to culture. She connected the ancient scriptural words stenciled around the border of the room in this Jewish Retreat Center with a gospel song using those same words: “we are blessed in the city, we are blessed in the field, we’re blessed when we come and when we go...” The ancestral paths of African-Americans, of the Jewish people, and of Quakers seemed to converge in this holy space as we sang the verse of this song.

Tonya’s joy and Light shone through her, as she reminded us to bring our own unique Light into the world around us. There is a strength in loving with diligence, of showing up, and loving ourselves, our God, and our world.

In a world that is quick to judge, which is overrun with fear mongers, with those who would squash the simple beauty of loving kindness to our neighbors, we were reminded that sharing joy and sadness with strangers and fellow travelers alike is perhaps the most powerful and important thing we can do in these times.

If we let the Spirit work through us in our daily lives, and refuse the mantle of negativity that others would ask us to wear, then our collective Light can energize movements that will “try to see what Love can do.” We know in our hearts that if we follow that path, amazing things will transpire.

As the Women of BYM, we hope that you find those who empower you to let your Light shine in this world, on this earth that needs the deep love that Quakers have to give.

In the Light,
The Baltimore Yearly Meeting Women’s Retreat