



To Friends everywhere:

Greetings from the College of New Jersey and Zoom screens across the world! We gathered this seventh month in the year 2023 for the 343rd Annual Sessions of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, our first hybrid Annual Sessions after three years online. Friends rejoiced at this opportunity to connect and to reconnect. Throughout our time together, there was a palpable sense of everyone pitching in and pulling together to re-weave the fabric of community, frayed by our pandemic time of isolation.

Many of us came to Annual Sessions excited to be together once again, but also carrying grief and overwhelm. Many of our meetings dwindled during the pandemic. Friends died, and other Friends drifted away and have not returned. First Day schools have collapsed. Many meetings, and our yearly meeting as well, have struggled to find enough people to do the work of our witness and of maintaining our meetings. And our hearts are heavy at the state of the world we live in. This month has been the hottest in recorded history. Smoke from wildfires in Canada has often turned the air dark and sent us inside for refuge over the past months. Our democracy is in peril. White nationalism is on the rise. Our transgender loved ones are under attack. Access to reproductive health care is no longer a right. Politicians speak openly of instituting laws criminalizing homosexuality in this country, and our LGBTQ siblings in places like Uganda are losing their lives. We came longing to drink deep of the living water.

The theme of our Sessions, *LIVING with our neighbors – GROWING into BELOVED community*, invited us to ground in “neighboring” as an action and in caring for our community. In the pre-Sessions Spiritual Formation online retreat, we explored the story of the Good Samaritan and Thomas Kelly’s essay on the Blessed Community. We are neighbors to all living beings, and can do the work of neighboring and neighborliness in myriad ways. In queries with small groups we rooted in our common desire to open to the Spirit in each other during these Sessions. The Wednesday keynote by Tucker and Sameer Manchanda, *Love Thy Neighbor*, asked us to reflect on the role of love in our lives: How is love the basis of ministry and where do love and integrity intersect? The Friday keynote by Jeanne Elberfeld, *Cultivating Beloved Quaker Community: An exploration through the science of stress and safety*, built on these themes to help us understand how experiences of trauma get in the way of feeling safety in Quaker communities and how we can make our meetings and programs welcoming and safe for everybody. Jeanne shared that the single greatest threat to a human being is isolation. After the separation of the pandemic, we understand this collectively in a way we never have before. We can only “stand still in the Light,” the first step to peace, if we have safety and belonging. Our communities can be healing spaces if we can meet people where they are and provide ways to help them regulate their nervous systems to access the experience of being gathered by the Spirit.

We were overjoyed by nearly forty children and youth coming to Annual Sessions! Children's Sessions focused on building a beloved community for the worship space. After three years apart, there is much building to do, and that building will continue among young Friends old and new – and their caregivers. There was of course some fun as well: water play with a giant unicorn sprinkler and reusable water balloons, a day-long trip to Snipes Farm, and leading Vespers on Saturday helping the yearly meeting reflect on community. Our youngest Friends (4 and younger) had their own space to play, color, and read books. But we also heard from our Young Friends and young adult Friends their grief that so few from those communities have returned. Joy and grief can both be true at the same time.

We were blessed with opportunities for intergenerational worship, communal joy, play (Quaker Jeopardy! Line dancing!), Bible study, singing, a rainbow, a Quaker witness mixer, fellowship, and work together. Forty-three Friends attended for the first time. Annual Sessions is a time to connect across differences and also to gather with those who share an identity: young adult Friends, Friends with disabilities, and Friends of color all gathered and found nourishment in sharing joys and challenges. When a thunderstorm knocked out power to the College of New Jersey on Friday night, many of us used the time to get to know our neighbors better. On Saturday morning, we learned about the heroic work of our tech team to get the audio working again. It was a reminder of the hard work going on behind the scenes to foster a hybrid Sessions that is accessible and welcoming: work by the clerks and officers, the PYM staff, the PYM councils and collaboratives, the Elders, the Pastoral Care team, the microphone ushers, the College of New Jersey, and each and every one of us in the body. Beloved Community takes work, and it is worth it. And – that work is not done. We have much left to do to help our community mourn our losses and discern what to lay down and what to take up. How is Philadelphia Yearly Meeting called to change as our world changes? How can we make sure that our work and witness are life-giving, Spirit-centered, and sustainable?

Business sessions highlighted the best of those among us who carry the work of the yearly meeting. Our longtime treasurer, Andrew Anderson, presented the budget with the message that, after more than a decade of work, he can lay down his faithful care of PYM's financial health knowing that we are no longer in the precarious place we were when he started. We heard stories of interconnection between our meetings, stories of cooperation and mutual care, stories of intervisitation between meetings and with the wider Quaker community. These webs of connections are becoming more and more necessary as we face the challenges represented in our two yearly meeting-wide corporate witnesses: the witness of addressing and dismantling racism and the witness of addressing climate change and climate justice. Several meetings shared how they have made connections with local African Methodist Episcopal churches and the richness of these shared relationships. Our yearly meeting's climate stewards shared the just-completed Playbook for Climate Action to help guide the yearly meeting's work. One of the first goals is to create a plan for all PYM operations to go carbon neutral. They reminded us that though the world ahead will not look like the world we knew, one way we *can*

choose to witness is through a renewed focus on community, the common good, and on sharing of resources that have not until this time been shared.

In this time of climate catastrophe, fear, and overwhelm, a Friend reminded us of Psalm 46 and the importance of rooting ourselves and this work in the Spirit: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. . . . Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

Friends, it is a joy to gather in community. We know that the future is uncertain. We have challenges ahead, we have grief to mourn, and we have big changes to undertake. But we also know that rooting ourselves in the Spirit and in our spiritual communities will nourish our ability to face the future together. May we know ourselves to be the Children of the Light, may we find refuge and courage in Beloved Community, and may we be true neighbors to each other and to the world.

– Drafted on behalf of the body of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting by the Epistle Committee: Joan Broadfield, Diane Kaylor, Karl Malchut, Sameer Manchanda, Joshua Ponter, Janaki Spickard Keeler, and Grant Stevenson