

## Baltimore Yearly Meeting Epistle 2010

To Friends everywhere:

This year Baltimore Yearly Meeting gathered for its annual sessions to consider the theme “Leadings for Today: Lessons from History.” Our stated goal was to explore racism. But this is a theme more broadly applicable in our work as a yearly meeting. Queries posted on the BYM website asked:

What do those Friends who have gone before have to teach us still, in a world where divisions persist?  
How can we learn from both their successes and their shortcomings? How do we hold one another accountable for our behavior and strive to evoke and recognize that of God in everyone we meet?  
Woolman was led to challenge the enslaving of others. What is Spirit calling us to do?

Racism is an old burden, and one we should never forget we carry. But we bear other burdens as Friends, as a yearly meeting, and as a society. We were challenged this year to consider our own prejudices and actions as a yearly meeting in a variety of ways.

A small group met before annual sessions in a retreat facilitated by Jean-Marie Prestwidge Barch to explore these questions through worship-sharing, exercises, movement, and stories. Those gathered came to understand better the contribution of our history, both personal and as a group, to how we make assumptions which can alter our perceptions about what is going on around us.

In our Tuesday night plenary, Maurice Jackson, a professor of African-American history and culture, urged us to consider the difference one person can make when he offers himself in the service of truth. Jackson spoke about the life of Anthony Benezet and about the evolution of the thinking of Quakers and others. He noted that while John Woolman was a fervent abolitionist, he nevertheless regarded blacks as not equal to whites. But Benezet called to everyone who would listen:

what can be expected but that the groans and cries of the sufferers reach heaven: and what shall ye do when God riseth up and when he visiteth, what shall we answer him?

In our Carey Memorial Lecture, Betsy Cazden spoke to us about the “use and misuse of history,” reminding us that even when history does not repeat itself it still tends to “rhyme.” On the other hand, lingering too much on the heroes and grievances of the past may make it harder for us to live to the potential of our future. She posed the query, adapted from philosopher Miroslav Volf, “In heaven are there permanent memorials to Auschwitz, to Hiroshima, to the Middle Passage, to the Quaker martyrs?” Can the atrocities humans have committed against each other be rightly let go after a time?

Amanda Kemp's Theater for Transformation, our Wednesday plenary, told the story of two Africans brought to New England on slave ships in the 1700s: Phyllis Wheatley, who became a renowned poet despite her short life, and Obour Tanner, who ultimately became a church leader and lived into her 80s. A rich dialogue was created from Phyllis Wheatley's letters and fictional replies from Obour Tanner. The troupe explained that their mission is to heal the world through forgiveness. They hope that their work helps us to open ourselves, see who we need to forgive, and work through our fears to get to what we need to do. The lead-in and early parts of the play emphasized the question, “Are you ready?” inviting the audience to respond each time they asked that question.

Our sessions were enriched by a wonderful variety of visitors from other YMs. In our business meeting sessions, we heard from our Friends recently returned from Kenya about works and opportunities there. Ann Riggs, principal of Friends Theological College in Kaimosi, gave wonderful news of growth, innovation, and stronger financial stability during her tenure there. Others spoke of the thirst they found among Kenyan friends to hear the Quaker story and learn more about the unprogrammed Friends' practices. We were enriched by these reports, which encouraged us to deepen our connection with Kenyan Friends.

Are you ready?

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In our monthly meetings we see robustness and hope: vibrant and nurturing small groups for Friends young and old, renewed commitments to committee service, and increased outreach efforts in our communities. How can we grow this new energy in our yearly meeting, which asks for 216 Friends to fill committee and representative positions each year?

Are you ready?

In our yearly meeting business we see ongoing and recurring issues, and we have struggled with complacency and with admitting our own mistakes. This year we seek to balance our budget and resolve mistakes in our past accounting so that in the future we can be better stewards of our funds, our programs, and our relationships with other Quaker organizations. It is always difficult to recognize our own mistakes and shortcomings, and to deal with familiar issues in a sensitive and thoughtful way. We have been challenged to find a new way forward that is financially sustainable, mindful of our past mistakes.

Are you ready?

General Secretary Riley Robinson spoke about the life of Emily Bayles Graham, a woman whose family was instrumental to the founding of an early meeting in Maryland. Riley did not know Emily in her lifetime, but he was amazed by the depth and variety of her family and her experience and brought it forward to us as an example: as we come to know others, we will always be affected by the richness of their lives and spiritual journeys.

Are you ready?

We challenge ourselves to be witnesses to the wider Quaker community on racism. Maurice Jackson asked himself (and us) “why we haven't solved racial inequality after so many years?”

Are you ready?

We challenge ourselves to be witnesses to the wider Quaker community on complete inclusion of our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Friends, recognizing their gifts and their portion of Light as the same as others.

Are you ready?

We challenge ourselves to nurture young people through our camping and youth programs even while costs to maintain them continue to rise. At the same time we celebrate the ministry the young people bring to us.

Are you ready?

We challenge ourselves being witnesses for the Light in EVERY person especially by reaching out beyond the geographical and theological borders of our yearly meeting throughout the United States and beyond, – young, old, black, white, Christian, non-theist, American, Kenyan, Cuban, and Palestinian.

Are you ready?

With the strength of God, we are.

Baltimore Yearly Meeting  
8<sup>th</sup> day 8<sup>th</sup> month 2010

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