



Miami Friends Meeting House
Waynesville, Ohio
1811

Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS



Fall Creek Meeting House
Pendleton, Indiana
1857

Epistle, Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting Annual Sessions 2023 (Approved 2023-06-18)

Friends from Ohio Valley Yearly meeting met at Mount Saint Joseph University in Delhi, Ohio for the 203rd Annual Sessions of Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting. The College's tranquil grounds enabled quiet contemplation and fostered unhurried conversation. The friendliness and helpfulness of the College staff made us feel at ease. Sessions opened on Wednesday, June 14th, 2023 with our assistant clerk reminding Friends that we were meeting on the original homelands of the Myaamia and Shawnee nations. These are peoples we have displaced and ignored. As well, our assistant clerk asked us to recognize the many ways we have benefitted from the work of enslaved peoples, a legacy whose effects are still manifest, particularly in the persistent gap in wealth between the races.

Friends heard a summary of the many epistles sent to OVYM from other yearly meetings. We rejoiced in hearing how the spirit moved among them. We trust that their meetings will continue to be filled with light and joy.

The theme for the sessions was "Finding Our Way – Your Gifts are Needed". The theme reflected that our world was still emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and that we were still finding our way back to fellowship. Friends were welcomed in a way that emphasized the theme of the annual sessions. Friends brought wrapped, unlabeled gifts. After selecting a gift randomly, Friends were invited to reflect upon the significance of the gift they had chosen. Several Friends spoke about the uniqueness or surprise of their gift, as if the giver had chosen them specifically to receive it. To emphasize the spiritual nature of gifts, Friends sang the traditional Shaker hymn "Tis a gift to be Simple". This spiritually sensitive state was reinforced by early morning worship sharing. In multiple groups, Friends labored to address queries generated to explore the theme of the sessions. Friends were asked to recognize their own gifts (which other Friends were encouraged to name) and grow into them.

Meetings for business gave Friends greater opportunity to explore our path. A restructuring committee suggested changes to our committee structure to simplify and refocus the work of Yearly Meeting in ways better suited to our numbers, leadings and strength. Some Friends saw the changes that the restructuring committee suggested as opening a new way for the yearly meeting to serve monthly meetings while other Friends felt that existing committees, perhaps with added responsibilities to connect with monthly meetings – a task made possible with newer electronic technology – already serve Friends well. As we were challenged to find new ways to be together and new ways to work, we were reminded of Romans 12:2 "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—[their] good, pleasing and perfect will."

Our first plenary speaker, Cai Quirk, a non-binary and gifted person from Ithaca monthly meeting gave us a spirit-filled message which both inspired and challenged us. Cai likened the rich range of genders to the spectrum of colors. Cai emphasized the important role meetings have in nurturing youth. Meetings may recognize certain gifts in young Friends such as their youth and good health, but fail to value a young person's spiritual gifts or give them the opportunities (the soil) for those spiritual gifts to grow.

Our second plenary speaker, Gretchen Castle, Dean of the Earlham School of Religion, formerly General Secretary for the Friends World Committee for Consultation world office, called us to consider more deeply how we can speak to the needs of our time, such as climate change. We need Friends to commit to giving all that we can. There is considerable diversity among Friends, and Gretchen showed a video where Friends from FWCC's four sections of the world spoke about their lives and leadings as Quakers and their experiences of the Quaker community. With all our distinctive strengths, Gretchen asked, "Why aren't our meetinghouses overflowing"? In some parts of the world, meetinghouses function as community centers during the week. Are we ready to invite others to a new life, she challenged us? A good start would be to recognize, "What is the good news that each of us in OVYM has to share"?

A set of eight workshops provided rich opportunities for Friends to learn about Quaker work and the Quaker way. Workshops put on by the two plenary speakers gave a more interactive opportunity for Friends to learn more and to explore the speakers' themes.

Our traditional variety show demonstrated the immense talent and creativity of Friends as well as their willingness to fearlessly and joyfully present spiritually enriching entertainment. After two hours of laughter and joy, Friends met together in the "Afterthoughts Cafe" for refreshments, dancing and conversation.

At this yearly meeting we welcomed Friends of many ages and abilities. Young children were present and were nurtured with love and attention. They, in turn, brought the gathering joy as well as messages of love and encouragement which they wrote in chalk on the sidewalks of the College's quad. Young-adult friends met and enjoyed fellowship and activities such as rafting. We were enriched by their energy, their creativity and their presence.

Friends young and old were reminded of the cycle of life and the importance of caring for one another regardless of age or ability. We celebrated the lives and long, rich marriage of a vibrant gay couple. We mourned the loss, over the past year, of several Friends. We sought ways to make new burial plots available for Yearly Meeting Friends. We scheduled times and places to enjoy picnics and future gatherings. In short, we celebrated the abundant life that our spiritual community, rooted in silent worship and nurtured by meaningful service, has to offer.

**We treasure our connections to Friends around the world and
send this epistle with our wish for many rich blessings for the coming year.**

Rachel Ernst Stahlhut, OVYM Presiding Clerk
Barry Zalph, Assistant Presiding Clerk