

*There is a tide in the affairs of men, Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.*¹

To Friends Everywhere,

Greetings from the 359th New England Yearly Meeting Annual Sessions. 638 Friends, including 114 youth, have gathered together on Abenaki lands, in a town today called Castleton. The University campus is abuzz with the gifts of summer, reminding us of the joy of this season of hope and renewal. Even as we rejoice in being together, we are acutely aware of the domination culture that appropriated this place many generations ago, and the ongoing oppression, both implicit and explicit, that continues to perpetuate pain among us.

Spirit has led us to begin a process of transforming our yearly meeting while abiding in its programs, structures, and missions. We are actively rebuilding ourselves into a religious society with the good news of liberation at its heart: one that is actively interrupting patterns of domination within and among ourselves and in our sphere of influence. We see this as a process of co-creation that is open-ended in time.

Our attempts at faithfulness to our testimonies and minuted concerns have drawn many Friends from meetings near, and as far away as Kenya, Ramallah, and Bolivia. Some of our sibling meetings are called to participate in our work. We are saddened because our Cuban Friends were again denied visas, preventing them from joining us in person. Yet we have been moved by their video visit.

This year we experimented with new ways of noticing patterns of oppression and faithfulness as they show up within and among us in our time together. Elders joined our clerks table for this purpose. We call each other in, provoking one another to support our corporate and individual spiritual growth, provoking us to love-agape.

As we are able, we adjust our behavior *in real time*. The learning is no longer confined to the mental realm, but is becoming a shared lived experience upon which we can draw strength and wisdom for the journey ahead.

Our plenary speaker, Lisa Graustein, has reframed our work as dismantling Empire. Quoting Margaret Fell, she asked us to “deal plainly” with ourselves. For years we have minuted our standpoints: deploring various institutions, actions, and systemic patterns of Empire, including destruction of our planet; domination of People of Color; the Doctrine of Discovery; domination of queer Friends by discrimination policies; and colonization of people and their cultures. Yet we have not fully or powerfully come under the weight of these minutes--we are stuck in the Empire, and we are the Empire. And the Empire is within us all.

Thus we are called not only to resist the outward Empire, but to liberate ourselves and one another from its bonds to become the fully formed, spirit-infused individuals and community we are called to be.

We are the Friends Margaret Fell wrote to: Convinced, but not yet Crucified. We wade into the deep water, breaking in a great unconformity both outward and inward, trusting that the water will hold us.

The tide is now at the flood. Can we listen, waiting in stillness? And act, in faithfulness?

We recognize that to follow this leading is, ultimately, to choose the ultimate condition of Faithfulness, known in many Christian belief systems as *the Cross*.

Our Bible half-hour presenter Colin Saxton brought us to it. In the words of Brian Drayton,

Living in the Cross means participating in a process of liberation from concerns, feelings, and beliefs that may give us a sense of security, but that also keep us bound and compelled in need and fear.

In a spiritual sense, recovery implies carrying our own Cross to the point of the death of some aspects of ourselves so that God can raise up new Life in us. 2

We are reminded that to carry the Cross is not only a denial of self, but also a step into the divine wholeness that God calls us into. Living in the Cross means being “absurdly joyful, entirely fearless, and always in trouble.” We long for that place, and know that we as a people are not there yet.

This year we have minuted our affirmation of full inclusion of the ministry of LGBTQ+ Friends, and our concern with the Friends United Meeting personnel policy on sexual ethics. After ten years under a complicated course of action that allowed Monthly Meetings to with-hold contributions to Friends United Meeting, we are no longer in unity on with-holding. The course of action is, therefore, discontinued.

We entered discernment in fear and trembling, reminded of the pain and separation caused by the FUM discussion over these past years. And, while this labor together is not without pain, we found in our meetings together a deep humility and tenderness with one another, a hunger for unity, and a desire to take the tide at this flood.

Empire conquers by dividing those who confront it. As Religious Friends of *Truth*, we seek within ourselves communion, where differences are transformed and transcended by Love. We hope faithfulness to the truth we have discerned in these sessions right the errors we have made and that we can move forward in a spirit of co-creation, with compassion and care for those who suffer.

Our work has also included the following: We celebrated long standing ministries. We celebrated relationships with Friends in the Great Lakes Region of Africa that have borne fruit in religious education. We celebrated witness on immigration, the Poor People’s Campaign, disarmament, sanctuary, and more. We continued work on revising our *Faith and Practice*, giving preliminary approval to two new chapters. And we continued to labor over faithful response to the conflict in Israel and Palestine and to the climate crisis.

A storm is brewing. A mighty wind blows, shattering our resolve and shaking our foundation. Revelation continues, ungracious and unannounced. A collapse of the past, and a daring glimpse into a future predicated on hope.

We are awakening to new, yet timeless truths, buried beneath old masks; uncovering the past to uproot the present and plant the future in soil anew. The journey is long, the path ill-lit. And we trust in the Light to guide us.

Truth is one and the same always ; and though ages and generations pass away, and one generation goes and another comes, yet the Word, and Power, and Spirit of the living God endures forever, and is the same, and never changes.3

Faithfully, your Friends of New England Yearly Meeting

Fritz Weiss, Presiding Clerk

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 5.
- 2 Brian Drayton, *Getting Rooted: Living in the Cross, A Path to Joy and Liberation*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 391 (2007)
- 3 This quotation, which contains material from Ecclesiastes 1:4-11, is taken from Margaret Askew Fell Fox, *The Life of Margaret Fox, Wife of George Fox: Comp. from Her Own Narrative and Other Sources; With a Selection from Her Epistles, Etc.* Creative Media Partners, LLC, (2018). P. 81