



ILYM Meetinghouse, McNabb, Illinois

# *Illinois Yearly Meeting*

## *of the Religious Society of Friends*

Consisting of 22 Quaker Meetings and Worship Groups  
in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, and Wisconsin

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### **2020 Illinois Yearly Meeting Epistle**

To Friends Around the World,

In spite of ‘the weight of the sad time,’ I bring you a message of hope. For I believe our young people can yet save the world. *The revolution that is needed now is already taking place in the minds and lives of some of them.*

Elizabeth Watson, as quoted in *Nine Contemporary Quaker Women Speak*

For the first time, Illinois Yearly Meeting held annual sessions via online video-conference from June 17-21, 2020, due to the coronavirus pandemic. In this and other ways, reflections on how Friends are called to change became a hallmark of the 146th Annual Session. Many Friends have spent months grappling with the losses and disruptions caused by this pandemic. In response, Northside Friends Meeting was joined by other monthly meetings in holding Memorial Day 2020 as a National Day of Mourning for Victims of COVID-19. In their statement, Northside Friends reminds us that as Quakers “our testimony of equality compels us to see the privilege enjoyed by those whom the pandemic has touched lightly and witness the pain of those whom the pandemic has wounded deeply.”

That same day, May 25, 2020, the horrific inequality that permeates our country was brought to the fore when a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. In witness to this injustice, sessions opened in silence for this same period of time. Heightened awareness of racist, state-sponsored violence, and the ongoing suffering from the worldwide pandemic were never far from mind as we contemplated our theme “How do we walk cheerfully over the earth answering that of God in others and ourselves?”

Earlham Quaker Studies professor Stephen Angell shared how we can draw strength from the words of Friends who have gone before us in times of crisis. In the 1660s in England, George Fox, knew fear of dying from endemic disease, which took the lives of hundreds of imprisoned Quakers. “The truth can live in jails,” Fox wrote to Friends. Stephen then shared how Black Friends from the past can help guide us as we face the ugly nature of racial disparities and police brutality in 2020. He read two poems by poet and Pendle Hill resident, Helen Morgan Brooks, written in the 1960s and shared an excerpt from theologian Howard Thurman’s 1971 book, *The Search for Common Ground*:

The heartrending years when hundreds of Negroes were lynched, burned, and butchered by white men, whose women and children were often spectators of the inhuman ceremony are conveniently forgotten.... The bodies of Negroes remember and their psyches can never forget this vast desecration of personality.

Stephen asked us, how can we confront this horrific reality that has lasted for centuries and not turn away from it? How can we act?

One of the ways Friends answered was with a sense of urgency that our work for change in the world today involves providing material support, physical and vocal presence, and financial contributions to Black-led anti-racism organizations. Those present also adopted a minute to acknowledge that Quakers have been part of systems of racist oppression and to describe how we will begin the work of learning about and reflecting on the effects of personal and structural racism in our lives and our spiritual journeys.

During these times our local meetings are also experiencing dramatic changes in format in response to the pandemic. In the absence of in-person gatherings, many of our monthly meetings are connecting online for worship, business, and fellowship. Although this offers increased accessibility and opportunity for many Friends to connect, others are struggling and describe the online environment as a barrier to the quality of spiritual and social experiences they have when physically gathered.

These struggles are especially true among high school Friends who tend to have a smaller local peer group, and are particularly saddened at being unable to fellowship in-person. Simultaneously, a number of high school Friends found meaningful opportunities to volunteer in support of children's events. Children from the ages of 3 to 15 held each other in the Light during the weight of these times as they participated in online Religious Education classes via Zoom. They were glad to have this way to connect to each other and the life of the Spirit, but it could not replace their freedom to play together for hours on the rural campus of the historic Illinois Yearly Meeting Meetinghouse.

While Friends were not physically present at the meetinghouse and grounds, these spaces will receive new care with the appointment of Judy Reese in the role of property caretaker. As we move into the coming days, Friends need discernment in considering how to better meet the needs of those among us and throughout the world who have been impacted by the intersecting forms of inequality.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963)

Illinois Yearly Meeting, via Zoom, Sixth Month, 21, 2020