



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
OF FRIENDS
QUAKERS

August 9, 2020

“Let me make the songs for the people, / Songs for the old and young; / Songs to stir like a battle-cry / Wherever they are sung. / Not for the clashing of sabres, / For carnage nor for strife; / But songs to thrill the hearts of men / With more abundant life.”¹

To Friends Everywhere,

The 360th Annual Sessions of New England Yearly Meeting met virtually over the course of ten days in Eighth Month 2020, in the midst of quadruple crises—a global pandemic, the ongoing epidemic of racism, a climate disaster in the form of Hurricane Isaias, and nationwide political unrest. The time for us to change is now.

684 Friends joined us, of whom 150 were under the age of 35 and 53 were visitors from outside our Yearly Meeting. We were grateful to be joined remotely by Friends from Kenya, Britain, Cuba, El Salvador, Canada, and Mexico, as well as a number of Friends from across the United States.

We were reminded at the opening celebration to treat our respective locations as holy spaces, and to view our devices as part of our pathway to the Divine. In the agenda for our business sessions we set aside the organizational work of the Yearly Meeting to focus more directly on the vital actions and living ministry among us. We were moved by Friends’ testimonies of the work they are called to in response to the ills of our world.

Last year when we wrote to you, we noted that there is a tide which, when taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. This year as we meet, we know we are swept up on such a tide. Yet we also see that we are adrift in a leaky boat; the forms of Quakerism we inhabit are not up to the task ahead. We have a religious organization and ways of being together that still embody empire.

On our first day of virtual Sessions we were given the gift of a three part framework for change from our Quaker tradition: revealing, surrender, and turning, or in more traditional language, conviction, conviction, and conversion. We are suspended in a moment of revealing, being convicted by the Light as we wake up to our sin. We are allowing our hearts to break, recognizing that the process of surrender and turning must be repeated over and over again.

¹ “Songs for the People,” Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

We are naming the forms of white supremacy in Quaker culture, including participation in slavery and ongoing anti-Black racism, the history of Quaker leadership in the Native American boarding school system, and the settler colonialism practiced by early Friends. We continue naming the patterns of domination at every level, in our person, our household and community, through the industrial economy and our extractive relationship to the ecosphere. These patterns are active in Quaker forms and practices today. We stand convicted.

We are stuck in the whirlwind, and need to choose surrender. We can cling tight in fear to the forms we know or release the forms to trust the Divine Spirit will show us our way. We know we need to move from the head to the heart and the Word must be made flesh. “And the end of words is to bring [us] to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter.”²

Our plenary speaker, Friend Amanda Kemp, implored us to move from our heads to our hearts, from our analytic mind to our imagination. Through a shared experience of living music we felt how music is not the notes on the page. She invited us to embrace the mess, and to not let ourselves be limited by the framing of the status quo. Asking us to create from a place of possibility that can invite what we don’t yet know, she said, “your imagination is essential for our liberation.”

During the plenary, Friend Amanda also helped us lean into what it means to be a harmonizer—a peacemaker. She reminded us that walking the path of the harmonizer does not mean we will all be playing the same role. Too often we mistake unanimity and sameness for unity with the Spirit.

In our business this year we cautiously practiced surrender. When we found ourselves caught up in words, we tried to allow new patterns to rise among us. As a Yearly Meeting, we began the process of apologizing for harm to Native Americans in our region by Quakers. Recognizing that our apology must come from the head and the heart, indeed from the whole body, we sent a draft of an apology to monthly and quarterly meetings for them to consider and to allow the words to work more deeply in us.

We also heard calls to action from the Friends General Conference Pre-Gathering of Friends of Color, from the Native American Reparations Working Group, and a joint call from the Racial, Social and Economic Justice and Earthcare Ministry Committees. We know we need to surrender and turn to move from words into action. To help us do so we shared these calls with our monthly and quarterly meetings so we may unite in the Spirit that animates our work. We are shifting our understanding of what it means to

²Isaac Penington [<https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/27-27/>]

unite with a minute. We know that our corporate statements must honestly name our present condition while also inviting us into spirit-led action.

Our Bible Half-Hour speaker, Friend Cherice Bock, painted the road ahead for us—the turning, our conversion—as an eco-reformation that shatters the hierarchies of the empire, replacing our ego-centrism with our rightful place in the household of life. We yearn to more fully enter into the kin-dom of God which is always present. We know, and are beginning to internalize, the Truth; that more abundant life comes only after surrender, and our conversion is complete only when we turn, when we imagine, when we embody, and when we do.

As our virtual time together comes to a close, we go forth, imperfect and humbled, with faith that our next steps will be planted exactly where they need to be. We feel the companionship of a Spirit that walks among us, and we feel the companionship of Friends and others around the world on this journey into the future the Divine Light invites us to imagine.

“Therefore, I urge you ... in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—that is your true and proper worship.”³

In Love,

Your Friends in New England Yearly Meeting

³ Romans 12:1 New International Version