

Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting 200th Annual Sessions (June 2020)

Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting joyfully greets Friends everywhere from our 200th Anniversary Sessions! Our planned great celebrations were unexpectedly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet, we persisted, and via the internet we gathered in great happiness together for a fruitful annual session. At least one Friend noted that the virtual meeting brought us closer together by viewing each other's homes, pets, and family members. We are grateful to the Friends who creatively envisioned this new form for annual sessions and those who shepherded us in this new technology. Though we were not able to sit down to meals together as in our usual meetings at Earlham College campus, nevertheless we experienced great comraderie online. There was an orderliness to meetings online that felt comfortable, as well as being able to clearly see all the adults present at once. A limitation was that most of the adults did not see our youth, as they attended different sessions.

Our gathering was strongly influenced by the racial and political tumult in the world around us. We gathered for two special meetings for worship with concern for racial justice and healing. A minute in recognition of the great social injustices that our nation has been built upon was proposed by Peace and Social Concerns Committee and accepted at our final Meeting for Business. Friends were encouraged to virtually attend the Mass Poor People's Assembly and Moral March on Washington during our sessions. Following Yearly Meeting sessions, there will be a follow-up discussion of FGC's request that monthly meetings collect age and race demographics.

Our theme was "Embracing our call to faith; Envisioning our shared future" in addition to our spirit of historical celebration. We began our first Meeting for Business by naming the Native American tribes that lived here in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky, upon whose displacement we now live. We also named George Floyd and others whose deaths have brought our attention to the enormous work we have yet to do as a nation and as a religious society to live up to our ideals of equality for all.

Our greatest accomplishment in Meeting for Business was approval of the final text of our Faith and Practice after twenty-plus years of work. We are grateful to the many Friends who have taken the lead and helped us discern this document of our faith. Outside of business meeting, we began the work of collecting the histories of monthly meetings.

Two helpful plenaries enriched us. Dr. Catherine Roma shared videos and the history of her 30 years leading choirs in local prisons. We found this deeply touching and inspiring. She recounted the dismal history of the movement of the American prison system from rehabilitation to being increasingly punitive and restrictive-- a prison-industrial complex which blinds us to the personhood of prisoners. She showed inspiring videos of the transformative power of music, including a performance of the musical "Hamilton" which was partly supported by the Braddock Fund of our Yearly Meeting.

In her plenary, Emily Provance shared her overview of the relationship between holding on faithfully to our traditions, listening with openness to people today, esp. young adults, and

being open but careful towards newness in revelation for our future. .She prompted us to think about the ways that we may be squandering our Quaker inheritance by living through the lens of individualism, the dangers of becoming too insular and comfortable. Embracing our faith and caring for the future may require work and sacrifice.

Morning worship and worship sharing refreshed our Friendly mornings. Worship sharing queries on our theme invited us to reflect on what we value in our faith; how we find strength in difficult times; what our call to faith looks like in the contexts of environmental crisis, the pandemic, and racial injustice; and how we envision and bring about a new heavenly order on earth.

We were enriched by our children and youth. The numbers of children meeting online were low and yet it was amazing to see even the small children comfortable with interacting on Zoom. In the afternoons, teens discussed climate change and racial injustice and carried out their own Meeting for Business. Our teens had an especially intense experience with Bobby Trice of Friends Committee on National Legislation.

Our afternoon workshops were rich, including our Yearly Meeting history, support within meetings in uncertain times, poetry and playdough, joyful walking, Queer theology, FCNL work regarding Iran and Yemen, and “Courageous Conversations” on race.

We were grounded and felt integrated by healing presentations and experiences such as yoga, music, outdoor contemplative activities, self-massage, “havening” (a kind of healing touch), and compassionate listening.

Our own celebrations were complemented by Friends who simultaneously participated in Juneteenth activities and earth celebrations for the midsummer solstice. We sang together before our evening Plenaries, each (muted) in our homes as a pianist gave us accompaniment. Our traditional Saturday night Talent Show was different but still awesome fun. First Day morning of our 200th Sessions was completed peacefully and flowed by being united under Spirit, though physically separated.

The following minute was approved:

We stand with the families of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Ahmaud Arbery, and all those who have suffered the pain of racism and its deadly consequence. We affirm Black Lives Matter and join with those insisting on radical transformation of our society.

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) can call on a long history of effort to dismantle the most blatant forms of racism that dates back to the founding of this country. At the same time, we confess to limited understanding, inadequate attention, and racist beliefs and behaviors within our religious society, including, for example, at one time segregating Black Quakers on a separate bench and preventing interracial relationships. In this time of widening awareness

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concerning social inequities, Friends' commitment to justice and equality is bringing more White Friends to a recognition of their personal responsibility and to a growing commitment to change. We acknowledge that once again, now is the time in which action is critically needed.

As a "Peace Church," we understand at a very deep level, that when there is no Justice, there is no Peace. We affirm our basic belief that there is "that of God in every person," and we are called by the gospel of Jesus to "Love our Neighbor! No Exceptions." We see this love as an active love and encourage the support of Black leadership, and the amplification of Black voices. We urge all to actively protect Black people from attack and arrest, and to work to dismantle systemic racism in all its forms. We stand together in love, calling for equality for all.