

Southeastern Yearly Meeting

Epistle, Gathering 2020

Cece Yocum and Beverly Ward presented the Epistle:

We are experiencing challenging times.

Yet, we gathered in some part over the last three months, beginning with a virtual mini-Gathering. We participated in worship sharing, workshops, a talent show, and plenary sessions. We even danced the Julia Geiger Memorial Chicken Dance, with joy from our homes. Special thanks to Esme Dellinger for her role as emcee of the All Ages Talent Show.

Friends from Friends Committee on National Legislation filled the gap of the loss of the Walton Lecture speaker, with information and inspiration about lobbying online.

We were joined by Friends from other Yearly Meetings to observe and participate in our virtual mini Gathering and plenaries. People who may have been unable to attend in person in the past, were able to join us in the online sessions. Some Friends, however, found the technology challenging for various reasons. Feedback from the mini Gathering included appeals for more online content such as movies, Project Drawdown and other workshops, and opportunities for spiritual deepening.

The Gathering Committee and others are planning more workshops, as suggested, at least once per month through 2020. There will be an evaluation after that time of the desire to continue with this format. The first of the workshops will take place on 23 June with Shelley Tanenbaum, General Secretary for Quaker Earthcare Witness. Brian Humphrey will lead a workshop on Collaborative Conflict Strategies for Interpersonal Situations to Earthcare on 28 July. More information and registration will be posted on the SEYM website.

For four weeks, we held Worship Sharing sessions with quotes and queries selected by the Worship and Ministry Committee prior to Meeting with a Concern for Business plenary sessions.

In our first plenary, more than 30 Friends from 11 Meetings and Worship Groups shared how they have blended old and new practices and technologies to meet their needs. Considerations on when and how to resume meeting in person and the extent to which online gatherings might help to maintain ties to distant members or persons in the COVID high-risk group. Many spoke of the desire to continue the practice of living simpler and more sustainable lives—“that in the Simplicity of less busy-ness, they found spiritual growth.” A Meeting Clerk shared “...we are uncertain of how long we will live the day we are born; and that we need to live each day in peace, and with gratitude.”

A number of committees met prior to the plenaries. A leading arose among several committees to develop a relief fund for those experiencing financial hardships as a result of the corona virus. The SEYM COVID-19 Relief Fund will assist individual Meetings and/or individuals identified by the Meetings. Peace and Social Concerns Committee also donated \$400.00 to Miami AFSC to help with farmworker food relief.

Representatives to Quaker and other organizations brought forward concerns, actions, and messages. These provided senses of shared burdens, in-sights, and aids.

Committees within the Meeting have been responsive, enduring, and provided a special grace throughout. This was witnessed by the rather sudden shift from an in-person Gathering to the creation and delivery of the virtual. Friends have and continue to serve the Yearly Meeting by fully showing up, e.g., the COVID-19 Relief Fund, serving on committees, providing queries, and much more.

Of particular concern are the impacts of climate degradation and systemic racism and the work that is needed to realize the world we seek. During the course of our Yearly Meeting sessions, we were heartbroken to learn of the murder of George Floyd and grieved for his family and friends and all those who have been harmed by racial and police violence, white supremacy, and the ongoing racism in our country.

We are heartened by the call by many to make changes in ourselves, our meetings and our communities for racial justice. We are looking at how we can increase our support to groups such as Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, among other possibilities. This Gathering is a witness to our commitment to do that work. As mentioned earlier, we are already planning how we will focus our energies on transformation.

Technology may provide a new-old sense of intimacy. We saw each others' living rooms and virtual backgrounds. The sense of community within the Yearly Meeting seems to have been strengthened and sustained though we look forward to the hugs, hang out time over snacks, the table talk, worshipping, singing and dancing together when we see each other in person again.

These quotes spoke to us during Yearly Meeting:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." - John 13:34-35

"Integrity forms the basis for covenant relationship in which persons exercise a sense of responsibility and accountability toward one another. Integrity...leads to an even deeper sense of community... If the wholeness aspect of integrity leads to a sense of community of persons, likewise it can lead us to an experience of spiritual wholeness in our relationship with God."

- Wilmer A. Cooper

2020YM-08: Friends approve the Epistle, which will be shared with other Yearly Meetings and Friends Organizations