

Epistle to all Friends
From Intermountain Yearly Meeting
June 16-20, 2021

To Friends Everywhere:

As we gathered virtually again this year, we began by considering some of the core beliefs we share as Friends. We may be socially distanced, but we are still in relationship with one another and with the Holy Presence that inhabits all people. We missed the company of younger Friends and look forward to being with them next year. We lament the passing of so many Friends and neighbors over the last year, which makes the opportunity to be here together, despite the limitations, all the more precious. We commit ourselves to humble self-reflection, as individuals and as a community of faith, so that we might align our actions to honor the lives of all people, regardless of heritage or background. We gather to listen for guidance, inwardly and from one another, so that we might better live out of our testimonies in the service of the Spirit and justice for all.

The theme for this year's gathering was *Race and Faith*. We were reminded that those who are marginalized in our culture have much to teach us about the world we live in. We want to listen for these voices, learn from them, and join them in pursuing justice. We can begin by acknowledging the people who have inhabited these lands long before they were designated as the states in which we now live. Indigenous people have hunted, farmed, traded, fought, lived, loved, and prayed on these ancestral lands for thousands of years. They have resisted attempts to eliminate their languages, cultures, and ceremonies. We lament this history. We also acknowledge Indigenous peoples' presence as sovereign nations, their enduring love for the land, and the valuable contributions they make in our communities today.

We are mindful that such acknowledgements are only a beginning, but as members of Fort Collins and Boulder Monthly meetings have demonstrated, the process of consulting with our Indigenous neighbors and drafting statements honoring their communities and heritage can initiate ongoing relationships. Members of Boulder Monthly Meeting, for example, have helped initiate Indigenous People's Day celebrations with the Arapaho (who view the Boulder area as their home), advocated for the return of native lands, supported the renaming of public sites, and developed educational programs about Indigenous history and cultures for area schools and the general public.

As we plan for our 2022 gathering at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, we are encouraged to deepen relationships with our Indigenous neighbors. This year, Intermountain Yearly Meeting (IMYM) passed a minute supporting the establishment of a Truth and Healing Commission to address the historical trauma experienced by Native American and Alaska Native children who were forcibly removed from their homes between 1869 and the 1960's and placed in Indian boarding schools. Quakers collaborated with the federal government in operating Indian boarding schools where children were taught to reject their languages, cultures, and spiritual practices in order to "assimilate." This minute urges Friends to learn the history of these Quaker Indian schools and to consider ways of supporting Native-managed healing initiatives.

Intermountain Yearly Meeting also approved a minute supporting the American Friends Service Committee's *No Way to Treat a Child* campaign "which seeks to challenge and end Israel's prolonged military occupation of Palestinians by exposing widespread and systematic ill-treatment of Palestinian children in the Israeli military detention system." We ask Friends and their Meetings to educate themselves and their communities on these violations of international law, and to call on their elected officials to support legislation that protects Palestinian children and eliminates funding that may be used to oppress and violate human rights, especially children's rights.

Our plenary speaker this year was José Santos Woss, the Director for Justice Reform at the Friends Committee on National Legislation, who shared some of his encounters with racism and invited us to consider our own experiences. In small breakout groups, we were tendered as we did so. We continued, in worship sharing sessions, to consider the ways that our faith might inform our understanding of privilege and racism.

As a Black Latino Quaker, José Santos Woss recalled being deeply moved by candid conversations about race he had witnessed among Friends. After many years of seeking community, it was his experience of Quaker faith in action, working with both the American Friends Service Community and Friends Committee on National Legislation, that led him to his spiritual home. If we want our meetings to be more diverse, he suggested that we live out of our faith and work for justice in our immediate communities so that others will find out who we are, what we hold to be true, and how we put that into practice.

Following our faith into action will present many challenges. If, as our faith tells us, there is that of God in everyone, how will we challenge racism in our midst? How will we do so as "a motion of love"? We are grateful for these and other queries inspired by this year's speaker, which we will carry into the hard work of racial conciliation that lies ahead of us.

This kind of work can only be sustained if our faith and our meetings are strong. To that end, time spent at our yearly gathering offers opportunities for nurturing one another and building community. This year, one of the ways we did that was "walking in the light." Each day, some Friends temporarily left their computer screens for a "pilgrimage in place," which involved walking in prayer or engaging in other grounding and centering activities. Though separated physically, Friends carried an awareness of one another in the Spirit and found connection and community later in the day, sharing, as pilgrims in the Light, their insights and reflections.

We are all pilgrims in the Light and we continue to reflect on the kind of mutual care required to support one another on the journey. Different ways of understanding the Divine are present in Intermountain Yearly Meeting. It is important that these differences not be ignored for the sake of superficial agreement. When they are recognized and understood, we can broaden our awareness of the spirit flowing through and among us. Our community is maintained through faith and fellowship with each other as we wait in the Light for the unity that draws us together.

In Friendship,
Gale Toko-Ross and Valerie Ireland, co-Clerks
Intermountain Yearly Meeting