

Intermountain Yearly Meeting

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www.imym.org

To Friends Everywhere:

We send greetings from Intermountain Yearly Meeting (IMYM) at Fort Lewis College in southwestern Colorado. We have returned to the southern edge of the San Juan Mountains after many annual gatherings in the high desert of northern New Mexico. We were grateful to find the sky relatively free of haze from the fires that have been burning throughout the southwest. A cool breeze greeted Friends as they gathered outdoors on the first day of early morning worship. We welcomed the sun, as we welcomed one another, celebrating the warmth that we feel in the company of Friends. Although we were attentive to lingering public health concerns and took precautions, we were thankful for friendly smiles and hugs. It was good to come home to this kind of fellowship, which helps us heal from the challenges we have all faced during the pandemic.

Our theme this year, offered to us by our children, was “Celebrating the Divine in All of Us.” With all of us in mind, our clerks and representatives were intent on making this year’s gathering as inclusive as possible. The accessibility of campus facilities enhanced our experience. For those who were unable to attend in person, access to programming was provided on a virtual platform. The technology team worked hard to create a hybrid welcome that included many friends zooming in on a big screen at the front of an auditorium. Well-placed monitors enabled Friends on Zoom to see the “live” audience and vice versa. Closed captioning further enhanced accessibility and provided some unintended levity with a few muddled translations including the transcription of “IMYM” as “I Am Yam.”

Fort Lewis College also strives for inclusivity. It was designated as one of six Native American-serving, non-tribal colleges by the U.S. Department of Education, which is especially appropriate given the deep indigenous roots in this region. This land is the ancestral land and territory of the Nuuchiu (Ute) people

who were forcibly removed from most of their homeland by the United States Government. This land is also connected to the communal and ceremonial spaces of the Jicarilla Abache (Apache), Pueblos of New Mexico, Hopi Sinom (Hopi), and Diné (Navajo) Nations. It is important to acknowledge this setting because the dominant cultural narratives in this region have long been told without full recognition of its original residents who continue to inhabit and connect with this land.

Ernest House Jr., our plenary speaker this year, offered us a deeper sense, from the perspective of the Ute Mountain Utes, of what that connection has meant and still means. Given those who came before him--including his great grandfather Chief Jack House, the last hereditary chief of the Ute Mountain Ute tribe, and his father, longtime tribal leader Ernest House, Sr., our speaker exemplified a family tradition of leadership.

He offered Friends an introduction to the history of the Utes in this region, reminding us of many broken promises and treaties separating his people from their ancestral homelands. But he also pointed to the resilience of the Utes who have managed to maintain traditional ways of being on the land, such as hunting, fishing, and gathering plants for food and medicine. He shared stories of the annual Bear Dance which continues to be an important ceremony of relationship and renewal. He also spoke of efforts to sustain Ute Culture and language through education, including a new charter school in Towaoc, Colorado which Friends expressed interest in supporting.

Ernest reminded us that land acknowledgement statements referring to the long time presence of indigenous people are only meaningful if they represent a commitment to reconciliation and healing. Part of that process for Friends, as we were reminded in a session led by Paula Palmer the following day, means coming to terms with the history of Indian boarding schools. Quakers established and ran some of these schools, which forced tribal students to abandon their cultural inheritance and identity in a misguided attempt to assimilate them. Ironically, given its advocacy for indigenous students today, Fort Lewis has institutional roots in one such boarding school, which was located in a former army fort in nearby Hesperus, Colorado from 1892 until 1956. Friends were deeply moved by stories related to Fort Lewis and other Indian boarding schools. These are hard stories to hear, but as Friends of the Truth, we must hear them. Friends were led to pray in this session for support and guidance as we enter into the early stages of this truth and reconciliation journey.

As Ernest House, Jr. said, this will be a long and challenging conversation, but we are intent on seeing it through. To that end, we passed a minute reconfirming our support for “The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policy Act,” soon to be reintroduced in the U.S. Senate. We also passed a minute reaffirming our commitment to nuclear disarmament. We realize that stating our intentions is only part of fully engaging issues like nuclear disarmament. Whether it involves our advocacy for disarmament, dealing with climate change, or standing up for the humanity of migrants along our borders, our best efforts will be faith-based, as Anika Forrest from Friends Committee on National Legislation reminded us. As we continue to grapple with these and other issues, we sustain ourselves with good cheer, fellowship, steady worship, and a strong sense of community, all of which we have found here at yearly meeting.

But it takes a lot of work to sustain a yearly meeting, and we have faced challenges, as all yearly gatherings have, related to the pandemic, not to mention an aging population. Often, it has been difficult to fill positions of responsibility. This year, we arrived at our gathering unable to find unity on a nomination for presiding clerk. And so we open ourselves to the Spirit and invite the kind of support and guidance that will help us recognize and celebrate that of God in one another, while also acknowledging our differences and divisions. It helps us to sit together in the silence and stillness of worship and it helps us to listen deeply to one another in worship sharing. It helps us to sing together. We are grateful for the joyful voices of younger friends who remind us that it is good to be open and vulnerable and ready to play. They remind us that the Spirit is in our midst.

In Faith, Hope, and Friendship,

Gale Toko-Ross and Valerie Ireland
Presiding Co-Clerks
Intermountain Yearly Meeting