

EPISTLES

of PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING

2013



**Philadelphia
Yearly Meeting**

of the Religious Society of Friends

DEAR FRIENDS,

From the earliest days of the Society of Friends, Quakers have gathered in community for worship, business and fellowship.

One of the ways Quakers have stayed in touch with each other through the years has been to write letters telling the story of their gatherings so to create a worldwide network of correspondence and connection. These letters have historically been called Epistles. *Faith & Practice* defines an epistle as “a public letter of greeting and ministry. Such letters are sent from a Friends meeting or organization to other Friends groups, *to supply information, spiritual insight, and encouragement.*” The term epistle was also used when religious communities in early Christian times communicated with each other.

This year at our own Philadelphia Yearly Meeting annual sessions, five epistles were written telling the experiences and spiritual insights of different cohorts within our faith community. It is exiting to share these messages within our PYM community.

Enclosed you will find 5 epistles. The first epistle is from our plenary sessions. Following, in order, are epistles from Young Adult Friends, Young Friends, Middle School Friends and Friends in the Children’s Program. These epistles tell the story of our experience as a faith community at a moment in time, our 333rd annual sessions.

Sincerely,

ARTHUR M. LARRABEE

GENERAL SECRETARY

(Cover) Jada Jackson (Trenton Meeting), Presiding Clerk, and Jim Herr (Lancaster Meeting), Recording Clerk, greeting Friends from the clerk’s table at annual sessions

(Below) The young people and adult volunteers in the Children’s Program celebrate Quaker community (Children from 15 monthly meetings participated in annual sessions)



TO FRIENDS EVERYWHERE:

For 333 years the Quakers of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, now encompassing eastern Pennsylvania, southern and central New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland's Eastern Shore, have gathered for Annual Sessions. This year, 2013, we met from July 24 to 28 at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, a new facility for us. The theme of our meeting was **"Gathering Together Our Past, Our Presence, and Our Future."**

Our first evening began with a speech by Friend Jennifer Karsten. We reflected with her on the theme "The Spiraling Journey: Lessons from the Perpetual Return to Quaker Community." With references to Joseph Campbell and Star Wars movies, she inspired us to see our individual and communal paths in terms of the hero's journey. As we come again to a place or crossroads, the experiences we have cycled through inform our handling of the challenges we encounter there. She quoted Nelson Mandela's and Bishop Desmond Tutu's use of the Zulu idea of Ubuntu, meaning "I am because we are." We should nurture Ubuntu in our community by increasing our connections and being ready to lead our own journeys as well as help others on theirs.

Friends experienced that spiraling journey throughout business sessions as the group shared ministry, concerns, and even an improvised song, "We shall be

transformed this day. . . ." On Thursday and Friday, Friends discussed the Education Standing Committee's policy of designating facilities for transgender Friends during Young Friends events. Before Sessions began our Clerk suspended the policy out of a concern that implementing the policy might require Friends to act in ways inconsistent with our testimony on equality. During Sessions it was raised that the policy did not reflect input received from the Young Friends community. Many felt that such policies should be developed collaboratively and approved by both the Standing Committee and Young Friends. In the future, we should be guided by the principle "No decisions about us, without us." There was loving appreciation for our Clerk's having the courage to set aside the policy until way opened. The clerk's table and the body worked together to open space in trust so that all could feel clear by the end of the session.

In other business matters, we learned that the group revising the 2002 version of *Faith and Practice* hope to have a substantial draft by 2014. We also agreed to hold future Annual Sessions in summer and in a campus setting.

Arthur Larrabee, General Secretary, began his report with the statement, "What a difference a year makes!" and recalled how last year's report included layoffs and cutbacks. This year's report included highlights such as youth-program revisions linking the age levels more strongly, a new "Threads" program

of newsletters and gatherings to connect Friends in different Monthly Meetings, an improved web site, a more supportive volunteer program, and a Trust to safeguard and promote the historic Arch Street Meeting House. Friends were happy to see our Yearly Meeting finding a new equilibrium.

Our treasurer's report was also met with cheer; we ended this fiscal year with a surplus due to Friends' generosity, the improving economy, and the practice of living within a sustainable budget. Additional safeguards are now in place to promote prudent management because "we need good habits to protect our future." After a few questions, Friends approved the 2014 budgets and received the projected 2015 and 2016 budgets.

Sessions made room for formal and informal opportunities for communication and connection between older adults and the younger children, Middle School Friends, Young Friends and Young Adult Friends. The Children's program worked on this year's theme by creating individual and communal trees. Roots, trunks, branches and leaves represented where children had been or what they were looking for in their own spiritual journeys. At the children's invitation, adult Friends also contributed to the trees. The children handed out gifts of two kinds of seeds: forget-me-nots and peas—because the children had whirled the packets of peas above their heads, transforming the contents into "whirled peas," which sounds like "World Peace." Junior Interim Meeting presented a video of

their service work at SHARE, where they packed boxes of food for people in need. They also unveiled a large banner bearing what they had discerned as "God's big idea" for them for the next two years: "Make the world a better place by finding fun ways to care for specific environments so that creatures there can be healthy."

Prefacing our afternoon business sessions was a new multigenerational program, "All Together Now." Staff from the children's program led Friends of all ages in using "spiritual telescopes" (curled notepads) to take a new look at the world and people around us. We connected by sketching each other and asking Spirit-filled questions. In multigenerational groups, we jotted down and shared six-word poems summarizing what was important about our lives and Quaker identities.

Friends received a progress report from our Long Range Planning Group, who, after a year and a half of work, offered a vision for our future: witnessing to the transforming power of love, grounded in worship, and yearning for a direct experience of the Divine. They proposed strategies to realize that vision, such as nurturing the disciplines of Quaker worship, business, and community; advancing our witness in the world; simplifying our governance and administrative structure; and partnering with other groups to achieve our goals. A deep listening session helped prepare Friends to receive

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the report and encouraged further effort.

On Saturday evening, Friends Niyonu Spann and Lucy Duncan partnered in mythic and personal storytelling that brought us face to face with the pain and healing that come from working through the “generational trauma” of racism and white supremacy among us. “So much of our truth,” Niyonu and Lucy told us, “is locked in ‘inappropriate’ stories to share” — yet without confronting one another boldly in truth, we are doomed to festering wounds and spreading injustice. “We must go through the pain of recognizing so we can be a whole community.” If we look beyond our tears at each murder, each miscarriage of justice, we will see the systematic patterns we need to change. We must hold on through rage, ice and fire until we return ourselves to humanity.

As Spirit accompanied us in Meeting for Worship for Business, afternoon

conversation groups, evening workshops and morning worship-sharing, Spirit was also present among those Friends who sat outside the dining hall writing in journals, talking quietly, or walking around the campus. The cicadas sang throughout the morning and into the night while young Friends rode scooters, played dress-up, and listened to guitar music under the tents outside Taylor Hall. At night, children and their parents caught and released fireflies: a picture of our past, our presence, and our future.

SIGNED IN AND ON BEHALF OF PHILADELPHIA
YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY
OF FRIENDS,

JADA S. JACKSON,
PRESIDING CLERK

*Friends in Meeting for Worship for Business
(Friends from more than 78 monthly meetings
participated in annual sessions)*



YOUNG ADULT FRIENDS EPISTLE: PYM 2013

TO ALL FRIENDS EVERYWHERE

Young Adult Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting offered a space within which to ground our fellows in a centered presence at 2013 Annual Sessions. Each night, we welcomed some visiting, some new to us, and some who returned after an absence. We gathered to debrief our days marked by resplendent sorrow, healing, inspiration, and play.

A few challenges accompanied the journey at these Annual Sessions: conflicts in our Yearly Meeting, proactive attention to alcohol consumption in our community of Young Adult Friends, staff support for Young Adult Friends, a call to witness to love in action, and mentorship of Young Adult Friends.

Alongside the larger body, we struggled with a Transgender Youth Policy, which was suspended by the

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Yearly Meeting Clerk preceding the start of Annual Sessions. We also struggled with conflicts precipitated by misunderstandings between a Quarterly Meeting, its leaders, and PYM staff. In these and other struggles, we united with the call to a Faith and to a Practice that sets love as the first motion. We

were called to trust in our stewards, to reach outside of our egos, and to claim our imperfections as we reached for our best selves. We confronted our fears in the face of God's invitation to radical relationship. In certain instances, this invitation could require us momentarily, delicately to set down Quaker Process.

We ask Friends to consider whether over-emphasizing Quaker Process clouds the senses and muddies our courage simply to love.

We held the question of right relationship closely on Saturday night when we conducted discernment on an alcohol policy for informal gatherings of Young Adult Friends. We affirmed that integrity, compassion, and respect are keystone elements of vital community.

We ask Friends to let these be the criteria that guide the direction of our larger community, here and around the globe.



Eric Peterson (Richland Meeting) presents the Young Adult Friends Epistle. Three generations of his family participated in annual sessions.

From love to love witnessed: we learned about social action in the wider community of Friends. Concerns included climate science and corresponding social action and inaction. We were inspired by the Leadings of our Bolivian and Peruvian Friends who shared joy and enthusiasm for connecting their diverse cultures with the global YAF community. They tested with us bringing the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage into their community, widening the diversity and scope of the journey.



Ruben Maydana (a leader of Bolivian Young Adult Friends) sharing ministry while Benigno Sánchez-Eppler (co-clerk of the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage) translates.

WE AFFIRMED THAT INTEGRITY, COMPASSION, AND RESPECT ARE KEYSTONE ELEMENTS OF VITAL COMMUNITY.

We struggled with discernment of how to supplement and support our dedicated staff member who shoulders the needs of the YAF community. Our General Secretary noted that staff support for Young Adult Friends is inadequate, and we unite in his concern. With gratitude, we thank Friends who approach us individually to let us know that they appreciate our work. Yet its weight rests on few shoulders, and we acknowledge that we could use some help. **We ask Friends** to inquire how they can support our community and follow through on the resulting commitment.

Our experience of community and fellowship leads us to dismantle much of the need for most of our committees in favor of a Yearly Meeting that opens us to the movements of the Spirit. For us, a more agile committee structure means laying down those that do not align with the Yearly Meeting's core mission: to witness to the transforming power of love and to respond to the leadings of the Spirit with joy in word and deed. We want to hold up the simplicity of our Children's Religious Life Program and hope to share in this simplicity in the future. We were heartened that some among us asked how they might address the needs of others, focusing their gaze out from their navels. Young Adults, too, stand convicted in the witness of our children who packed boxes of food for people in need and defined another mission to carry them forward for the next two years. Jesus was once quoted as saying, "Let the little children come to me and do not try to stop them, for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14). May we hold ourselves to similar standards, and call the body to do the same. If we follow

our Guide faithfully, “show what we stand for and are willing to suffer for it,” as one Minister said during sessions, “the numbers will take care of themselves.”

We are excited to report that YAFs and older friends will be gathering and working together in a sub-committee of the YAF Working Group to explore and to establish a mentorship program for the enrichment of the Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings. Through this work, we wish to emphasize the care and support of YAFs using the tools, gifts,

and wisdom already in place among older Friends in our Meetings.

We are faithful in Friends to heed the call of radical relationship, action, and collaboration.

YOURS IN TRUTH,

YOUNG ADULT FRIENDS OF
PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING

Jane Bryer (Downingtowntown Meeting) presents the Young Friends Epistle. (Young Friends from 14 monthly meetings participated in annual sessions)



“WHAT’S THE BUZZ, TELL ME WHAT’S A HAPPENING??”

THE Young Friends had a spectacular time at this year’s Sessions and especially enjoyed the inclusiveness Muhlenberg’s campus provided. We held multiple business meetings discussing the suspended Youth Programs Transgender Policy developed recently by the Education Standing Committee. This policy has caused great anguish among our community, and Young Friends have been deeply involved in the discussions and efforts here at Annual Sessions, including Thursday’s Conversation Tent and the following Minute of Exercise.

Young Friends united in our business to create our own proposed policy to send on to the Education Standing Committee in order to find a practice that fulfills the needs of our community.

Our business meetings also included a discussion of upcoming gatherings and a visit from Zan Lombardo, the (outgoing) Adult Clerk of Young Friends. Zan told us all about the 2014 Friends General Conference Gathering. We greatly appreciated her presence at business meeting and throughout her many years of service.

We also had unprogrammed time filled with friendship and games. Young Friends shared many laughs reminiscing about our group trip to see the musical Jesus Christ Superstar — we especially

[WE] WROTE THE THE WORSHIP SHARING QUERIES FOR THE LARGER BODY OF ANNUAL SESSIONS.

appreciated the use of modern dance moves and all the amazing high notes!

Young Friends really enjoyed the many intergenerational activities. During this gathering we not only facilitated our own worship sharing, but also wrote the worship sharing queries for the larger body of Annual Sessions.

[WE] UNITED TO CREATE OUR OWN PROPOSED POLICY TO SEND ON TO THE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE IN ORDER TO FIND A PRACTICE THAT FULFILLS THE NEEDS OF OUR COMMUNITY.

Saturday evening Young Friends had the opportunity to attend the keynote speeches and found the topic of racism to be relevant and helpful. We came away appreciative of the speakers’ willingness to share their stories with such openness and honesty. Young Friends not only really enjoyed All Together Now, but got to expand our Quakerism, minds, and spirits with people from all generations. Young Friends and Middle School Friends came together for the eventful trek up to the Glen Onoko falls and the treacherous slide back down! The Young Friends had the delight of supervising and playing with Middle School Friends and Children’s Sessions each day.

Overall, the Young Friends had a great time and look forward to next year’s Annual Sessions gathering.

**WITH LOVE AND LIGHT,
PYM YOUNG FRIENDS**

What would you like the wider community to know about being a Middle School Friend? What is it like?

- » Our Quaker experience is more about making friends and talking about our spiritual journeys than sitting in extended periods of silence.
- » We love that we have the freedom to learn about Quakerism in flexible ways through diverse programs.
- » We're just beginning to be ready to worship in silence, this is the growing edge for us.
- » We love fun programming, hanging out with friends, and the fact that we get to learn about famous Quakers and Quaker history in a fun and active manner.

What does it mean to be a Quaker in Middle School?

- » In our local middle schools, even the Quaker ones, we aren't around very many other Quakers our age.
- » We feel fortunate to have the PYM experience, and to be immersed in a group of other Quakers our age.



Loretta Lucy Miller (Plymouth Meeting) sharing a peaceful moment with Middle School Friends. (Middle School Friends from 8 monthly meetings participated in annual sessions)

Summary of our time together:

- » Climbed mountain, went under waterfall; dress up games
- » SPICES (*Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, Stewardship*) activities/storytelling about SPICES
- » Sumi ink club
- » Field games, running charades, parachute games, four-square
- » Skits about Mary Dyer and Lucretia Mott
- » Made new nicknames
- » Swimming in pool and skyball
- » All-together now

CHILDREN'S PROGRAM EPISTLES: PYM 2013

FELL GROUP EPISTLE 2013

We, the rising 3rd through 5th graders of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (and our teachers) did fun projects, including making a three-dimensional tree that represents our community, our core values, our cares and concerns, and actions we can take on those cares and concerns. We joined the younger children in a “Children’s Summit,” where we discerned **God’s big idea** for us to act upon in the next two years.

While doing this work, we played games, had fun, sang and enjoyed each other’s company. We joined our older friends in business meeting, gave a report on what we did, and got a report from the adults. We celebrated our work with a dance party and ice cream.

We invite you to come join us as we continue this awesome work at Junior Interim Meeting on the 2nd Saturday of October at Arch Street Meeting House and at next year’s Annual Sessions.

SUBMITTED IN FRIENDSHIP,

**CHUCKIE, SARA, BENJAMIN,
JOE, ELLA, NICK,
OLIVIA, DEVIN, JADA**

CHILDREN’S PRIORITY FOR 2013-2015

**WE ARE CALLED TO MAKE
THE WORLD A BETTER
PLACE BY FINDING FUN
WAYS TO CARE FOR SPECIFIC
ENVIRONMENTS SO THAT
CREATURES THAT LIVE
THERE CAN BE HEALTHY.**

FISHER GROUP EPISTLE 2013

We, the Fisher group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting learned that we each have a special past, presence, and future. We used the image of a tree to discover how the grass and roots reflect our past. The trunk, branches and leaves stand as our presence. And the birds in the sky carry seeds into our future.

Fisher Song:

My roots go down, down
into the earth (3X)

My roots go down.

My branches and trunk stand tall (3X)

I stand tall.

My bird carries seeds into
the future (3X)

I carry the future.