

## **Quaker Life Council**

### **ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2020-2021**

July 13, 2021

#### **Our Reality**

This was a pandemic year. The world was (and remains) besieged by the Covid-19 virus. This has been a unique year of uncertainty, distancing, grieving, and new ways of coping. All year we met by Zoom each month, getting to know each other through our facial expressions, our ministry, and even our backgrounds. We were short in number, well under the 15 maximum needed to fully operate the Council – and two of us felt obliged to leave the Council part way through the year. Even so, at our best we were grounded in the Spirit.

The world, our nation, and the communities around us anticipated and lived through an unusual, divisive, and high-stakes election year. Our secular body politic is frayed, beset by misinformation, paranoia, and vitriol. This was the context for our work together this year.

The Quaker Life Council currently oversees seven committees – Governance, Agenda, Sessions Coordinating, Youth Programs Advisory, Ministry and Care, Friends Counseling Service Advisory and Program. This is a large span of responsibility, and it is hard to recruit people who can focus on this full span of work when they may also have a passion for specific ministries. This structure only works with open and frequent communication.

So, as we moved through this year, our major challenges were **communications** (how come more people don't know what we are doing – and why don't we hear from them?), **capacity** (we need more members representing more local meeting communities), **clarity of governance** (who's on first?), and **lack of time** (too many topics get tabled for future meetings).

#### **Our Struggles**

We labored to better understand the many entities for whom we have oversight responsibility. Our lessened numbers meant that much of the best interaction occurred through staff, keeping many boats afloat.

The significant donation approved last year for the Ujima Friends Peace Center was delayed by a temporary loss of Ujima's tax exempt status, insensitivity, and miscommunication. It took several months to resolve – creating both bitterness and a follow-up clarification of yearly meeting process and policy.

We learned painfully from this that we are in community with one another and should trust one another more – especially Council members and committee clerks. We need to anticipate when a sensitive issue arises – especially where racial wounding may occur -- who might be hurt and reach out

to them. We are all Quakers – Black, white, indigenous, and people of Color. We are all “we,” there is no “them.”

One of our members who resigned submitted a profound and helpful letter that was considered by all three Councils. One key observation was:

*Our yearly meeting has been through a great deal of pain over the past six years. We have literally been torn asunder because of repeated incidences involving lack of transparency, racial insensitivities, and the appearance of informal power structures that are not accountable to the body. This I believe has resulted in a decline in PYM participation, spiritual vibrancy, and trust within the community. . . . While none of this may have been intentional, it does not make it less hurtful to the individuals involved or make it less damaging to our community. Friends, we have to do better.*

## **Our Progress**

Annual sessions using Zoom in July, 2020, turned out to be a success. Not knowing the progress of vaccinations or incidence of the coronavirus for this year, the decision was made to hold Continuing Sessions and Annual Sessions in 2021 also by Zoom. Several groups working under the wing of QLC – especially the Sessions Coordinating Committee and all the staff who support us – have made these Zoom-based sessions fruitful.

We also welcomed a new set of co-presiding clerks. They have been wonderful facilitators of joint council sessions each month and have also visited our deliberations at key moments when matters pertaining to them occurred. We are deeply grateful for their service and creativity.

We received a series of reports from the Ministry & Care Committee about how the request for a yearly-meeting-wide truth and reconciliation process gradually shifted into a “truth and transformation” process. This will require years of effort and sensitive training. The key to healing past wounds is that the truth must be fully heard, even when it hurts.

The Program Committee has been revived and is working well. It has been especially busy this year supporting and nurturing collaboratives and sprints.ensuring that PYM’s collaboratives and other programs not otherwise assigned a committee such as bridge contacts, resource Friends, and our relationship with young adult Friends are well cared for.

We reviewed our Council’s mission and clarified some of our procedures for nominating members of our committees and receiving reports (this is really an ongoing process of discernment). We gave attention to our yearly meeting’s three areas of deep concern: racial justice, climate change, and membership

We applauded the good work of the Ministry & Care Committee as it condensed more than 60 State of the Meeting reports from monthly and quarterly meetings into one state of the yearly meeting report.

Each month we meet regularly with members of the Administrative and Nominating Councils on agenda items pertinent to all three councils. At special called sessions in January and April we embarked on a facilitated

exploration of ways that our councils could work better together. We tried to take a realistic look at the yearly meeting's situation as a "mature nonprofit" (now 340 years old!). We started with the questions,

- Whom do we serve?
- What do they need?
- And how do we meet those needs?"

The resulting discussion highlighted three themes:

- a) Balancing Council time between doing the work and self-assessment,
- b) Encouraging monthly and quarterly meetings to initiate actions, not being topdown, and
- c) Encouraging diversity in race, age, and gender orientation.

To the theme of balance (a) we sought to evaluate how our joint council sessions and Annual (and Continuing) Sessions function for us. Such balancing depends on each clerk's planning and how each council member carries out their assigned work. To point (b), local meetings are not likely to initiate anything if they don't feel that Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is relevant to them. Too many of us are still unclear about our current communications and use of resources. "Pruning is always a painful process" – and the yearly meeting's recent reorganization may have left hurt that still needs to be healed. And to point (c), the yearly meeting reflects its constituent monthly meetings – some are healthfully diverse and others are not. In each step along the way – as our struggle over the Ujima gift recently illustrated – we must be sensitive and listen deeply.

## **Our Support**

The Quaker Life Council is blessed to have the devoted support of competent and caring staff. We especially enjoy their reports and appreciate all they do behind the scenes to help with nominations, agenda-building, and preparing presentations. We will miss Zachary Dutton, Associate Secretary for Program and Religious Life, when he moves on at the end of the year – he leaves big shoes to fill.

A report by Grace Sharples-Cooke, Associate Secretary for Advancement and Relationship, updated us on PYM website services, communication advances, and other ways to build our yearly meeting community. (This has been a challenge in the pandemic era.) We all agreed that, "Open and rich communications are important for the vibrant health of the yearly meeting and our spiritual lives as Friends."

## **Going Forward**

We rejoice in the maturing and discernment of the yearly meeting's three big issues: racial justice, climate change, and membership & belonging. Each of the groups tasked with this work has truly dwelt in the Spirit as they moved forward to help us all. Our depleted numbers did not impede their inspiring work.

And, in closing, we have observed that in recent years our Quaker Life Council has often been obsessed by crises and not been especially strategic. So, as we move forward into a new year of operations, hopefully with a fuller slate of members, we will continually ask ourselves:

- How can QLC be more strategic and build better relationships?
- How do we set effective priorities that guide our sub-activities? and
- How can we do this work while staying deeply grounded in Spirit?

Respectfully submitted by **Anthony Stover** of Germantown Meeting, Clerk, on behalf of these Council members who have served part or all of the past year:

Kate Bregman, Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting

Julia Carrigan, Mikleton Monthly Meeting

Marge Dawson, Merion Friends Meeting

Sue Dietz, Medford Monthly Meeting

Melanie Douty-Snipes, Fallsington Friends Meeting

Robert Greene, Princeton Friends Meeting

Steve Elkinton, Chestnut Hill Monthly Meeting

Bryn Hammarstrom, Wellsboro Monthly Meeting

Tom Hughes, Reading Monthly Meeting

Ayesha Imani, Germantown Monthly Meeting

Guinevere Janes, Media Friends Meeting

Susan Kight, Camden Friends Meeting