

PACIFIC YEARLY MEETING EPISTLE — 7th Month 2010

To Friends everywhere: Greetings!

Pacific Yearly Meeting met for its 64th annual gathering from the 26th to the 31st of 7th month, 2010, at Claremont McKenna College, a pleasant southern California venue with cooperative mild weather. Friends complimented the College on its accessibility and the quality of meals.

Friends from 27 of 37 constituent meetings and 8 worship groups were in attendance at the opening plenary. In addition to several guests, we were introduced to Sarah Beutel of Mountain View Meeting, Intermountain Yearly Meeting, who is our new Youth Program Coordinator.

Our theme for this gathering was “Engaging One Another in the Spirit.” Engagement was not too easy, due in part to distractions of urban noise and construction and landscaping work on the Claremont McKenna campus; this served as a reminder that our work also is building and maintaining our community, which must seek silence within, instead of outside. To make it happen, each day we devoted the whole morning to worship and worship-sharing. Listening deeply is a step toward engagement, sometimes aided by audio technology and sometimes not. During worship we were reminded to be present: “Our openness is an invitation to do God’s work, to receive and share our gifts with each other.”

Our first guest speaker was George Lakey (Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting), author of *Powerful Peace Making*, who spoke of integrating the spiritual and the social action parts of our lives. His topic “Expect the Unexpected” began with the query: “What sets people free to engage with and experience the spirit?” He proposed these steps: Shift your perceptions – see the “container” (a metaphor for community), not just the individuals – Be present in the moment - Be willing to be held spiritually accountable and acknowledge corporate responsibility - Be willing to struggle. He expanded on these points in three interest groups (one specifically for our teen attenders), responding to questions about Quakers’ culturally-promoted conflict avoidance tendency. Later, George Lakey displayed his lighter side by playing piano to accompany singing of Broadway show tunes.

From the plenary hall, we emerged onto a plaza to play intergenerational games for relieving the tension of working on hard topics. Games included slow-motion activities like chalk drawing on the sidewalk, as well as ball games and Frisbee. The games were an energetic contribution of Junior Yearly Meeting, as was an exercise in intergenerational “chat boxes” at dinner, where we exchanged responses to queries posted above the tables. Tables under the topics of “Quakers and the future” (sample query: Are

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Quakers open to change and able to move with the times?), “Quakers and God” (Is “God” an appropriate term for your beliefs?) and “Quakers and Peace and Conflict” (Are the seeds of violence present in relationships?) were crowded with discussants of all ages. These exceptional contributions of JYM were welcomed and appreciated.

Our second speaker was Vanessa Julye, co-author of *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African-Americans and the Myth of Racial Justice*, returning for her fifth and final visit as coordinator for Friends General Conference’s Committee for Ministry on Racism. She spoke of the challenges we face with respect to race and other differences in the Religious Society of Friends -- we invite new people into our house but, in effect, ask them to change in order to fit in. She concluded with suggestions for continuing support of affinity groups and other steps to engage western Friends in overcoming our reluctance to include Friends with differences as equals. Our well-attended early morning sessions on “Transformative Quakers” might next year also include biographies of Friends of color. Vanessa Julye’s advice on racial exclusion and George Lakey’s illustration of Friends’ exclusiveness based on social class resonated as two notes of a chord. Our challenge is to find the right notes of resolution.

Open committee meetings continue to engage those who are not direct participants in committee work in the decision-making processes of PYM. Such conscious transparency is a necessary preliminary to anticipated changes in our organizational structure. Among these changes are a proposal by the M&O Futures subcommittee to expand the duties of Representative Committee, with the intention of reducing business agendas at the annual gathering and strengthening the connection of monthly meetings to PYM. Prominent among remaining concerns are whether decision-making at Rep Comm should be open or restricted to delegated meeting representatives, and whether final approval of the budget should continue to be done by the general gathering. Increasing costs of holding the annual gathering (with possible decline in attendance) and the cost of the Youth Program Coordinator position are growing concerns. We are prepared to provide the resources necessary to support the Youth Program Coordinator, even at some sacrifice.

As ever, attenders with like-minded interests deepened their connections through Bible study, outdoor worship in a “tea garden”, affinity groups and many interest groups. Attenders learned how we all live our faith as Friends through these channels of communication. A special occasion this year was the 25th anniversary of the PYM Unity with Nature Committee, which continues to focus attention on our relationship to a damaged world.

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This year Junior Yearly Meeting grew greatly due to successful business meetings and intergenerational community building. JYM's prison book service project was great fun as well as a learning experience. The "Chatboxes" strengthened JYM's relationship with the greater PYM. JYM's worship sharing was a powerful spiritual experience. In whole JYM had a very successful year.

Our children's program dealt with expected transitions between age groups – especially into and out of the elementary age group – but change is still a challenge. We enjoyed a connection with the children through their spoken lessons at the beginning of morning worship. We are fortunate to have children's program staff well-suited to this task.

Young Friends (who describe themselves as "college-ish, or 18 to 35-ish") adapted to unexpected changes in leadership, feeling themselves to be more an affinity group than a separate organizational structure. Young Friends led a walk to see "Dividing the Light", an illuminated water sculpture created by James Turrell, a birthright Quaker known to local Friends. Plans are being made for Sarah Beutel's work over the next year, including leading a JYM and transitional Young Friends camping trip just after close of PYM.

Our placid daily cycle from worship to meals to plenary sessions was interrupted by a fire alarm during Wednesday dinner (fortunately, there was no fire). A more welcome interruption came in the form of Friday's community night, where we enjoyed music, stories, and an enigmatic play about the end of the Universe written and performed by middle-school-age boys.

At our plenary on memorials, we remembered the 32 Friends who have died in the past year, all of whom were dear to us. We also see with sympathy the increasing frailty of some of our elders. These people are among the last founders of institutions like Friends Committee on Legislation of California, which forces us to acknowledge that PYM will soon no longer have first-hand memories of important events in its history. Yet we remain confident for the future of PYM, as younger Friends grow in capability and respond to the needs of our Quaker community and the world.

We send our love and our gratitude to you, wherever you may be in the world of Friends.

In peace and friendship,

Marilee Eusebio, Presiding Clerk,
Pacific Yearly Meeting