

Friends General Conference Central Committee Observer Report to Representative Committee 2019

The opening clause of the Friends General Conference's Meeting of Purpose states that the Friends General Conference, with Divine guidance, nurtures the spiritual vitality of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) by providing programs and services for Friends, meetings, and seekers. You can read more of this minute and their Vision Statement on the FGC's About page on their website.

Friends General Conference currently offers a number of different programs to Friends. These include:

- The Annual Gathering (which a number of people in PYM have attended)
- The Quaker Bookstore, which is available online
- FGC Publications
- Grants for Meetinghouse Repairs and Upgrades
- FGC Ministry on Racism
- Resources for Adults and Children for Religious Education
- Quaker Cloud

The FGC Spiritual Deepening Program, through which individuals or groups can attend online or in-person groups on specific topics and meet short-term or for up to a year. (We will attempt to run a demo in the back of the plenary room during breaks).

At this year's Central Committee Meeting, we spent a lot of time listening and responding to the report from the task force conducting an Institutional Assessment on Structural Racism, which had been approved the previous year by the Central Committee. The following is a summary of the working group's findings:

While analyzing the survey data, focus group transcripts and historical records, it became clear that although FGC intends to welcome People of Color to the Religious Society of Friends, the depth of tension and differences with Friends of Color has never been fully heard nor understood. Friends have chosen to avoid conflict rather than acknowledge and work to resolve conflict. Whistle blowers have often been side-lined as troublemakers or have simply chosen to leave the Society. When surveyed, Friends described themselves as non-racists and even as antiracists. Our Monthly and Yearly Meetings have written minutes, epistles, and public statements regarding racism, white supremacy, and related topics. We offer workshops on racism and white supremacy. However, we fail to see the overwhelming evidence that Friends of Color have not felt at peace at our Gatherings. Survey respondents report that Quaker traditions reflect white culture. Our board and staff are primarily accountable to people of European descent. Our meeting walls do not reflect a diverse, blessed community. Our nominating process tends to reinforce the status quo. The projects and services we fund do not address racism. How then can we, in all truth, label ourselves as anti-racists? The evidence is lacking. In reality, FGC cannot claim to be anti-racist. We cannot expect to achieve antiracist transformation by doing what we have always done. Survey responses suggest that FGC's governing structure is non-egalitarian, non-transparent, and hierarchical. Friends who have served on Central Committee admit there are only a few people who know how to get things done. Our decisions are made by Friends of European descent and the decision-making process tends toward secrecy. This is the status quo. These traits describe a nearly club-like institution that is passive about its role in anti-racist work.

[Task force members] described some of the working group's data analysis. They looked at survey data, historical data, personal stories, and focus group feedback, and broke down the

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data received in a number of ways. The survey results in particular reveal that Friends are open to being self-critical, but also that we have very different experiences in some areas.

The working group engaged in deep discussion and discernment as part of analyzing the data, and found that points of disagreement can be the richest places to dig in. They worked through conflict between Friends of European descent and Friends of color, in spite of Friends' traditional aversion to conflict, and came to a richer shared understanding because of it. Friends were eager to ask questions about the survey data, particularly in terms of demographics of age, race, gender, and geography. What the working group found was that much of the data did not split neatly along demographic lines, especially when we acknowledge that many people live on the edges of categories like race and gender. It was lifted up that the average age of survey respondents was 63, although many noted the need for more programs and services for younger Friends. Many of the survey responses reflect that Friends tend to have a golden view of ourselves as non-racist or anti-racist, but also tend to be averse to change and to moving obstacles that block our way to transformation.

The task force also submitted a minute for Central Committee's consideration, which was approved after an extended period of discernment:

Central Committee approves the establishment of a group to implement the work of the Institutional Assessment on Systemic Racism within Friends General Conference. Its charge shall be to guide the transformation of Friends General Conference into an anti-racist organization. Consistent with the decision of Central Committee in 2017 to prioritize the work of anti-racism, FGC commits to work to eliminate white supremacy within the Religious Society of Friends and to model anti-racism as we support the work of this implementation group. Central Committee authorizes the Institutional Assessment Working Group (IAWG) to serve as a naming committee to bring forward the names of eight Friends to serve on this implementation group. The names for the implementation group shall be brought forward for approval to Executive Committee at its winter 2019 meeting. The individuals to be recommended shall constitute at least 50 percent Friends of Color and consideration shall be given to include Young Adult Friends and broad geographic representation. The implementation Group will use the information and recommendations from the Institutional Assessment on Systemic Racism within Friends General Conference 2018 report to begin their work and its work shall not be limited to the scope of the report and its recommendations. The implementation group shall be accountable to Central Committee and will report its progress to each Executive Committee Meeting and annually to Central Committee. Central Committee authorizes the IAWG to propose an appropriate budget to support the work of the implementation group and authorizes the Executive Committee to approve that budget at its winter 2019 meeting.

I felt privileged to attend this meeting as an observer for Pacific Yearly Meeting. I really appreciated the process that FGC engaged in, which included a several hour-long process of the central committee itself assessing for itself where FGC stands on a scale of one to five in terms of eradicating racism. Hearing the task force's critiques was hard, but I think this is a necessary part of coming to terms with what is keeping the Society of Friends such a white organization.

Heather Levien, PYM Observer to Friends General Conference Central Committee