

Epistle of Alaska Friends Conference Annual Session, 9th month, 2012

Greetings to Friends Everywhere!

Under the falling autumn leaves and joined by the Friendly Folk Dancers, we send this epistle from the Dickerson Friends Center, near Wasilla Alaska. We celebrate one of the largest participations in recent years with Friends gathered from Chena Ridge (Fairbanks), Anchorage, Homer, and Juneau Monthly Meetings, and Talkeetna, MatSu, and Haines Worship Groups. We held in the light the Talkeetna families and their flooding town who were evacuated and cut off from us due to recent rains. We celebrated their eventual arrival on the final day. We appreciated the new foundation under the meetinghouse, the space for kid programs and sleeping in the new wall tent, and new, level, spacious double outhouse.

We gathered Friday evening at the Knik Elementary school for dinner and a lively dance program led by our guests. The Friendly Folk Dancers' ministry is to bring dances of countries in conflict together in the spirit of promoting world peace. One highlight, a wedding dance from the Balkans, encircled the couple married the longest, John and Lous Brubaker. All joined Mark, Sarah, Rosemary, Edna, Colleen, and Peggy in the meditative song and dance, "The Bells of Peace."

The folk dancers also contributed a large part of the children's program. Bill Herman continued his tireless support of our yearly meeting by stepping forward to lead the children's program and creating a George Fox and Quaker comic for the children.

Saturday morning following a rich meeting for worship, Michael Burke, priest of St Mary's Episcopal Church in Anchorage spoke. He shared his and his Church's spiritual journey living and witnessing the acceptance of gays, lesbians, bi-sexual and transgender persons in our society. He noted that his denominations' clarity on this issue, developed over the past 40 years, freed him to take a leading role in supporting the recent ballot proposition 5 in Anchorage. He spoke of the tension he felt between the prophetic/truth telling and pastoral/peacemaking roles, and the need to follow one's personal

leading in each situation. He was able to shed light on the historical contexts of some biblical passages that have been used to condemn homosexuality. We shared stories and suggestions for promoting dialogue. Michael described his experience in calling another religious leader to meet in prayer over this issue. He identified how one's world view informs one's spiritual perspective on issues. It can be fear based and unchanging, or open to continuing revelation.

Following lunch Charley and Lynn Basham shared their experiences at the Friends World Conference in Kenya with stories and pictures. They described a common transformational journey that Pastoral, Evangelical and Unprogrammed Quakers experienced while meeting together. They reported a strong sense of connection with Quakers throughout the world united in a common movement toward peace, justice; an experience of the peaceable kingdom here on Earth rather than in a nebulous future.

Meeting for Business followed. monthly meetings and worship groups presented reports. There was a common thread of dealing with reduced attendance yet encouraging outreach activities. As prompted by FCNL, we approved a minute supporting the mandated military cuts of the Budget Control Act of 2011, and encourage all Friends to lobby about this. We discerned future plans for statewide gatherings, to include a spiritual nurture retreat in the Spring, under the care of Statewide Ministry and Nurture and affirmed the decision to gather for our next Annual Session in the fall.

After supper we gathered with John Dickerson, Mahala's son, to discuss the "Roots of the Alaska Friends Conference" from the 1960's through the present. John affirmed his appreciation of our presence, and continued his family's welcome here. We read Mahala Dickerson's Memorial Minute recently published in Friends Journal [*attached*] and discussed her central role in growing our Yearly

Meeting. We created a photo board with pictures collected over the decades, noting the youthful appearance of some of those still present.

Mahala Ashley Dickerson

October 12, 1912- February 19, 2007

Mahala Ashley Dickerson was born in 1912 in Montgomery County, Alabama, to Hattie Moss and John Augustine Ashley. She grew up a Baptist and attended Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, where she developed a lifelong friendship with Rosa Parks. Mahala graduated with honors from Fisk University in 1935 with a degree in Sociology. In 1938 she married Henry Dickerson, with whom she had triplet sons: Alfred, John, and Chris, although later Mahala and Henry divorced. Mahala received a law degree from Howard University in 1948 and was the first African American woman to be admitted to the Alabama bar. She was drawn to Quaker ideals and manner of worship, visiting Pendle Hill in 1950, an experience she describes in her book *Delayed Justice for Sale* as one of her most inspiring.

In 1958 Mahala became the first black homesteader in Alaska's Mat-Su Valley and the first African American of either gender to be admitted to the Alaska bar. A Friend, whose family homesteaded a couple of miles away, remembers the ways she drew her neighbors together, inviting the children for an Easter egg hunt in the winter-bleached grasses by her beloved lake; helping arrange an elaborate jeep relay system for the two weeks of impassable mud every April, and bringing her calm Quaker ways to communal discussions of such things as how to get the road plowed during the winters. Her experience and generosity were a blessing and focal point for the young Yearly Meeting. In the 1970's unprogrammed Friends began gathering each summer at Mahala's Wasilla homestead. She donated part of her homestead for a meetinghouse, and Friends raised a simple post-and-beam structure. From the start, Friends and fellow travelers showed up from Interior, Southeast, and Southcentral Alaska to attend Annual Sessions, and Mat-Su Monthly Meeting sometimes met there as well. Mahala welcomed everyone.

In 1983 Mahala became the first African American president of the National Association of Women Lawyers. The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) gave her an honorary law degree in 1984 for her advocacy of minority rights, an award with piquant meaning for Mahala, given that years before she had

sued UAA for equal pay on behalf of a female UAA professor. Her ties to Davis House and Pendle Hill, where she served on the board from 1988-1997, were ongoing. She was a benefactor, legal pioneer, and tireless advocate for the poor and oppressed. In 1995, the National Bar Association honored Mahala with the Margaret Trent Award, whose other recipients have included Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sandra Day O'Connor, Anita Hill, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Mahala practiced law until she was 91, accepting many cases for which she received no payment, and serving as a mentor to young minority attorneys. Mahala encountered racism even in the Religious Society of Friends and worked to heal it. She did not give up on the group or the individuals, but held out hope and willingness to talk and forgive. Her pragmatism lightened with humor, untiring welcome, grace, and undiminished capacity for joy in the face of disappointments and tragedy, willingness to connect with others, and drive to set things right when she saw injustice, inspired all who knew her, and continue to inspire us today.

Mahala passed away on February 19, 2007, at home. She was 94. Her son Alfred passed away in 1960. She is survived by her two sons, John and Chris Dickerson.