

Epistle - Pacific Yearly Meeting Annual Session 2013

*“Not by strength of arguments...and convincement of my understanding...
came I to receive and bear witness of the Truth, but by being secretly
reached by the Life. For when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s
people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched me to my heart.”*

–Robert Barclay, 1678

To our Friends in the Truth throughout the world and in the spirit of our Brother Paul, called the Apostle, from Pacific Yearly Meeting:

252 souls met at Mt. Madonna near Watsonville, California, between the 29th day of Seventh Month, and the 3rd day of Eighth Month, 2013. When we met here in 2001, a month before the events of September 11th, we numbered 497.

We have been strengthened, as have our religious forbears, by Paul’s Epistles, and the Friends’ tradition of letters between Quaker bodies. In that tradition, we send our greetings and would like to tell how the Spirit prospers amongst us.

We have been delighted by Creation in this beautiful setting of tall trees, tranquil deer, wily foxes, intrepid turkeys, profound fog, and deep silences. God is as near as breathing. We have lit spiritual fires in the mist.

We welcomed visitors from Friends Committee on National Legislation, Earlham School of Religion, La Paz, Bolivia, Japan, Haddonfield Monthly Meeting in New Jersey, and North Pacific Yearly Meeting in Washington state.

We minuted our commitment to continue the salaried position of our Youth Program Coordinator, that we might nourish the bodies, minds, and spirits of our inter-generational community. We joyfully commend this Friend as a catalyst for deeper connection across the wide generational and geographical span of our yearly meeting. The independent non-profit Pacific Friends Outreach Society (PFOS), having sought for nearly two decades to develop a permanent dwelling for Pacific Yearly Meeting, has laid itself down. We acknowledge the river of pain that runs under the history of these labors. In banking this dying fire, PFOS offered its assets to endow our Quaker youth programs, lending heat to a growing blaze. It seems that like Paul, we are committed to travel where the Spirit moves us, putting up our tents and taking them down again when it is time to move on.

Though the Apostle Paul admonished us twenty centuries ago “in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free...,” we are still laboring to realize this vision of equality in our own community and the wider world. Friends met and considered racial justice issues, immigration concerns, hunger strikes in our prison system to protest prolonged solitary confinement, along with other issues of equality. We recognized that our youth programs contain more people of color than the Senior Yearly Meeting. The youth engage in direct action toward racial justice, including witness on the U.S./Mexico border, continuing the Quaker tradition of working and worshipping with Native Americans, and doing service projects that benefit those Jesus referred to simply as “the poor.” We rejoice that Pacific Yearly Meetings’ labors in years past have borne rich fruit with regard to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Our clerk reminded us “...most of our Yearly Meeting has an inward focus, bringing our house into good order. When we focus on Friends’ work with peace and justice, emotions are closer to the surface, which can lead to deep ministry and strong reactions.”

A minute brought by our Peace and Social Order Committee opposing the use of lethal drones prompted a called threshing session around our process and intentions with “social justice minutes.” We long for greater integrity between our outward communications and our lived Witness. Quakers have always expressed prophetically on social issues. We must resist compulsive word-smithing. Are our minutes of concern and action notional, or are they spirit led ministry? Are they effective, and does that matter? Our collective voice is powerful: Friends’ witness is a benchmark. In our monthly meetings, there has been a shift from the corporate witness tradition of early Friends to supporting individual leadings. Let us not “rubber stamp” a minute, but search our souls. Our labors in this regard must be carried forward.

“Offline” conversations this year sounded a cautionary note. What do we do about the increasing cost of our gathering, and its dwindling attendance? Is the Nominating Committee’s challenge of finding sufficient talent causative, or symptomatic? Are our youth programs too tangential to the life of our gathering? Could we give more business to an Executive Committee and/or Representative Committee, doing only well-seasoned and essential business at our annual gathering, focusing instead on fellowship and spiritual uplift? Is PYM becoming like a failed state, lacking the ability to make collective decisions? What are the spiritual, ethical, and perhaps theological implications or causes of our challenges?

Discipline Committee brought forth a minute requesting a clear directive to begin revising our *Pacific Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice*, last released in 2001. Though there was broad support, we did not find unity on this minute. Concerns were raised that the current text is still serving adequately, and that we can ill afford the energy and money of undertaking a revision at this time. Fruitful questions were asked about whether a *Faith and Practice* Wiki might be useful, as well as: Where is the “juice” in the work of the body? What topics should our

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discipline address, looking forward toward 2030? We considered revising only the Advices, Queries, and, perhaps, Testimonies. This may be a place to start.

If our life as a Yearly Meeting is an epistle, what does it say and to whom?

When we meet each year, do we seek to be transformed by the Spirit, by God stirring and Christ moving among us? Are we reached by the Life in our plenaries? Unity is always there; all we must do find it. Do we remember this? Do we Trust?

Family Night gave a needed opportunity for community celebration, complementing our time of mourning in Meeting for Memorials. Performances were whimsical, tuneful, hilarious, cute, virtuosic, heartfelt, athletic, poetic, and peripatetic. We closed by standing in a circle and singing “Circle round for freedom, circle round for peace...”

Just as pinecones germinate in wildfires, may the fire of the Spirit open us to new witness as one inter-generational community. May we be broken open as sowers of the Seed with which we have been entrusted.

From our city on a hill, we send our wishes that you may grow in faithfulness, revel in the sweetness of gathered worship, and find yourselves strengthened for your journey.

Signed on behalf of your loving brothers and sisters in following the Truth,

Steve Smith, Presiding Clerk