

Epistle Excerpts

Selected by the Reading Clerk to be read at Pacific Yearly Meeting Annual Session 2021

From the Friends General Conference Pre-Gathering Retreat for Friends of Color and Their Families, 6th Month 2020 (full epistle [here](#))

To Friends Everywhere:

We begin by remembering our ancestors who were strong enough to make a way for us. Friends of Color and their families met for Pre-Gathering Retreat on 26 Day through 28 Day Sixth Month 2020. This is the eighth year Friends of Color have met for our Pre-Gathering Retreat. First-timers felt welcomed and validated. This year, we met virtually with our largest attendance yet. There were 47 attendees, ranging in age from 11 months through 77 years from Canada, Mexico, Switzerland and the United States of America.

The importance of this Gathering for Friends of Color worshipping in community together cannot be overstated. To our Friends in the wider Quaker world: we, the Friends of Color, can't breathe. During this weekend, we enjoyed the rare opportunity of not being othered in Quaker space. We experienced the joy of being seen as we are and the affirmation of a supportive spirit among ourselves in the "Amen corner" We were able to exhale, relax, and breathe together.... The gifts of the spirit were abundant.... We experienced spiritual renewal that was awakened by moving through pain to hope for the future for ourselves and our children.

From New England Yearly Meeting, 8th Month 2020 (full epistle [here](#), español [aquí](#))

.... We are adrift in a leaky boat; the forms of Quakerism we inhabit are not up to the task ahead. We have a religious organization and ways of being together that still embody empire.

On our first day of virtual Sessions we were given the gift of a three part framework for change from our Quaker tradition: revealing, surrender, and turning, or in more traditional language, conviction, convincement, and conversion. We are suspended in a moment of revealing, being convicted by the Light as we wake up to our sin. We are allowing our hearts to break, recognizing that the process of surrender and turning must be repeated over and over again.

We are naming the forms of white supremacy in Quaker culture, including participation in slavery and ongoing anti-Black racism, the history of Quaker leadership in the Native American boarding school system, and the settler colonialism practiced by early Friends. We continue naming the patterns of domination at every level, in our person, our household and community, through the industrial economy and our extractive relationship to the ecosphere. These patterns are active in Quaker forms and practices today. We stand convicted.

We are stuck in the whirlwind, and need to choose surrender. We can cling tight in fear to the forms we know or release the forms to trust the Divine Spirit will show us our way.

Our plenary speaker, Friend Amanda Kemp, implored us to move from our heads to our hearts, from our analytic mind to our imagination.... Asking us to create from a place of possibility that can invite what we don't yet know, she said, "your imagination is essential for our liberation."

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We know, and are beginning to internalize, the Truth; that more abundant life comes only after surrender, and our conversion is complete only when we turn, when we imagine, when we embody, and when we do.



From Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Young Adult Friends, 8th Month 2020 (full epistle [here](#))

To all Friends everywhere:

Greetings from a gathering of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Young Adult Friends, together from many different homes for Annual Sessions, July 29–August 2, 2020.... We humbly acknowledge that many or all of us are settlers here, and live on stolen lands.

We are all called to be responsive to this moment, and that spirit demands that we evolve and grow. Part of our evolution should be critically considering what we call “Quaker practice.” All our practices have been shaped by the culture by which they were surrounded. In America, white supremacist culture has always been part of those surroundings. What parts of the practices we have inherited are perpetuating oppression? What parts of the practices bring Truth to the surface of our Meeting? These must be separated and it is our choice, as a yearly meeting, to maintain them and pull them apart. How can we carefully tease apart that which will nourish the future of our faith, from that which closes it off and diminishes it?

One Friend gave a message that they worry about the source of the Quaker tendency to avoid anger and conflict. Do we fear that our shared beliefs are not strong enough to hold us together through it? Do we doubt the existence of the power that binds us? Young Adult Friends, as both the present and the future of this community, want to participate in and inherit a yearly meeting that can hear grief and anger, because without these, our prayers are shallow.

P.S. To all Friends everywhere, abolish the police. Love, Young Adult Friends

From the Friends General Conference Pre-Gathering Retreat for Friends of Color and Their Families, 6th Month 2020 (full epistle [here](#))

The Pre-Gathering Friends of Color Retreat provides a reprieve. Friends of Color need respite from the systemic racism too often found in our American Quaker community that often goes unseen by many white Friends. Friends of Color need respite from the insidious lie of white supremacy manifested in daily oppressive traumatic stressors (microaggressions) which have the effect of blaming the oppressed for our own oppression. Friends of Color need respite and support which our home meetings have not provided. Friends of Color are fatigued from being asked to teach white folks.

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We ask all Quakers to heed a Call to Action. Please sit with these queries:

1. What is the Spirit leading me to do about the historic and ongoing racial pandemic across my meeting, my community, my work environment and my country?
2. How can we honor the memory of people who have lost their lives to the struggle for a better world?
3. How can we construct ways for people to engage and remain engaged beyond good intentions in the struggle for true equality in health, education, wealth and against state sanctioned violence?
4. How can we encourage the support of Friends of Color in Quaker worship and meetings around the world?
5. How can Friends de-center themselves in order to listen to and hear Friends of Color?
6. How can I support respite for Friends of Color?

.... For People of Color, the human-made pandemic of racism is deadlier than COVID19, and we need you to do work so that we can BREATHE.



From the Fellowship of Friends of African Descent, 8th Month 2020 (full epistle [here](#))

The Fellowship of Friends of African Descent gathered from August 27-30, 2020.... with the theme of the Freedom Rides of the 1960s.

On Thursday, Friends gathered to learn about John Lewis and reflect on “good trouble” to which we are called.

On Friday, our Gathering began with programmed worship and a self-care exploration.... Participants considered how our spiritual journeys are deepened when we care for ourselves emotionally and physically.

During Friday’s second session, we.... learned that several Quakers of African descent, including Paul Cuffee, started schools for “colored children” and integrated schools in the 17 and 1800’s.... Those of us at the Gathering wrestled with the question of how Quaker schools had changed to focusing on providing education to the wealthy and the socially “elite.”

In the following session on Friday, we learned about the horrors of Bloody Sunday.... In small groups we explored the continued relevance of the peace testimony and recognized that it involved developing the inward capacity for forgiveness as well as facing the consequences of “overturning tables” like Jesus did.

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During our last stop on this virtual Freedom Ride, we revisited the Minute on State Sanctioned Violence adopted by the Fellowship in 2016. We acknowledged how the Spirit moved among us in a prophetic way in that year and we were under the weight of how many lives might have been saved from senseless violence had we, and Friends generally, been more proactive in our commitments.

Throughout the four-day gathering, speakers and participants alike could hear the Spirit call us to go beyond the secular, social, and political perspectives on the challenges of our day and seek the deeper spiritual healing and understanding that we all need to advance the freedom work of our ancestors on whose shoulders we stand.

From Baltimore Yearly Meeting, 8th Month 2020 (full epistle [here](#))

.... What was normal is gone and the new normal has not yet emerged. We hold [Margaret Benefiel's] advice to us: that we stay grounded through daily personal spiritual practice; that the hard work of being in community is itself a spiritual practice; and that community is fundamental to discernment as we ask, "What is mine to do? What is ours to do?"

What is ours to do is grounded in our relationship with each other. Our work is not just making decisions, but the act of "being" a yearly meeting. Being in conflict in community takes on an aspect of holiness because we labor together, as if "together" is the only option. Community builds hope and, like courage, hope is contagious. Our hope that Baltimore Yearly Meeting will in time be a truly just religious community sustains us in this work.

From Illinois Yearly Meeting, 6th Month 2021 (full epistle [here](#))

This year's sessions focused on the Testimony of Equality: How are the choices we make considering all of our Beloved Community, and not the few who speak loudest or the group that is most dominant? How are we finding that of God in those around us, not only to acknowledge our shared humanity but to celebrate it fully?

We can see this time as an opportunity to rebuild our practices and processes in ways that both keep the beauty and strength at the core of what it means to be a Friend and move away from that which "gatekeeps" our community. Rather than seeing shifts away from traditions and long-held "norms" as a burden, we can instead see them as a gift.

As we find a new rhythm to our lives, it will be tempting to return to patterns that are so deeply engrained in our daily routines, from both dominant cultures and Quaker traditions. Seeking inclusive alternatives, we are called to hold each other in the Light, as we co-create a better future by working for a world where equality is not more equal for some, constantly asking ourselves what love requires...