

Epistle of the 75th Annual Session

Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 2022

Loving greetings to Friends everywhere from Pacific Yearly Meeting's blended annual session, held from July 22-27 in the coastal redwoods at Mount Madonna Center in California on the original land of the Amah Mutsun, Ohlone peoples. Pacific Yearly Meeting includes Friends from California, Nevada, Hawaii, Mexico, and Central America. 177 people attended in-person including 11 children, and 18 Junior Yearly Meeting teens. Wild turkeys, deer, and steller's jays were also frequent visitors. Over 100 attended online most days, aided by multiple projection screens and cameras, including two remote controlled cameras for offering close-up shots of speakers. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of Mount Madonna's tech staff and some Zoom-savvy Friends, our first hybrid annual session was rich and meaningful for both online and in-person attenders and allowed for record attendance from farther away Meetings such as Honolulu.

Our theme, *Beloved Community; What does it mean to belong to ourselves, to each other, to the earth?* spoke to our yearning to be together again after pandemic isolation. Despite the fact that annual session coincided with record high Covid-19 numbers, a covid safety team worked diligently to make tough decisions juggling safety and inclusion. Participants cooperated to a remarkable degree with safety measures. As we celebrate Pacific Yearly Meeting's 75th anniversary, jubilee themes of healing and renewal infused our expectant, waiting worship, plenary sessions, affinity groups, and interest groups. In an act of jubilee debt forgiveness, a financial surplus accumulated during the pandemic years allowed organizers to offer annual session free-of-charge for all children and pay-as-led for adults. Bible Study continued this theme by reading Isaiah 40, which includes the passage, "Oh Lord, revive us again."

Inclusion and diversity were at the forefront as we grappled collectively to acknowledge with loving care harm that has been done in our gathered spaces, including Meeting for Worship. We seek to repair the harm of past and ongoing ouches from insensitivities learned in the dominant society. We seek to recognize ways that we might practice simple loving kindness with one another and build a beloved, just, and inclusive community. Keynote panel speakers Marlene Coach Eisenstein, Peni Hall, and Keith Runyan challenged participants to have humility and be attentive to areas where we lack awareness, especially ableism, racism, and disharmony with the natural world. Open, curious conversations can draw out Friends who feel excluded. Spirit equips us to see each others' gifts and needs and prompts Friends to offer a tender hand in acts of kindness.

A document outlining proposed guidelines for pausing before speaking to reflect on where ones' words are coming from was presented by the Ministry Committee and the Racial Justice Subcommittee which has developed a series of workshops throughout the past years examining subconscious exclusionary practices among Friends. During gathering, the Racial Justice Subcommittee presented the keynote address virtually to New York Yearly Meeting, something that would not have been possible in the past. We found comfort that our work in making Friends a more inclusive and aware community, willing to acknowledge the ongoing impacts of history, is shared by so many Yearly Meetings around the globe. Honolulu Friend Aaron Terry guided a group of participants in the traditional Hawaiian practice of Ho'oponopono, the healing and righting of past wrongs, and we looked at how Friends might bring more mindfulness in resolving conflicts amongst ourselves.

Quaker discernment process offers a model for seeking truth beyond divisions in this time of wars and scars, climate devastation, social, economic, gender, and racial inequities. Friends are developing ways to mend past harms and move society toward a healthier future. Deep listening is an act of surrender. Worship deepens when Friends are able to release regrets and worries with each exhalation and receive renewal with each inhalation in what Thomas Kelly named as “continually renewed immediacy” with the Source of Love. How might Pacific Yearly Meeting Friends become living epistles, couriers of the regeneration? We are called to be bold with one another and a beacon of light for the rest of the world.

Parents found solace in each others’ stories of struggle to fully participate in gathering while caring for young children and resonated with a report by the Children’s Program Committee raising concerns about children being ignored or even “othered” by adults not specifically tasked with childcare. A parent affinity group was formed, which led to parents feeling empowered to bring their children to an interest group focusing on the future of Pacific Yearly Meeting which was inadvertently scheduled at a time when it was challenging for parents to attend. The kids drew their vision of the future on a giant piece of paper and brought joy to everyone. Despite anxieties about dwindling numbers, 1/3 of in-person attenders at this annual session were under the age of 35. We began the gathering looking at the past and ended feeling present and optimistic about the future.

We heard ministry with an adaptation of a song often sung in our meetings:

Until true diversity is gained
To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed
To turn, to learn, will be our delight,
‘Til by turning, and learning we come round right.

Laura Magnani, clerk
on behalf of Pacific Yearly Meeting.