

Epistle of the 76th Annual Session Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Loving greetings to Friends everywhere from Pacific Yearly Meeting's annual session. We met July 21-26, 2023, at Mount Madonna Center, in what is now known as Watsonville, California, the ancestral homeland of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. While some activities were held solely on-site or on-line, most were blended. Thanks to capable technical help, we joyfully saw and heard Friends on screens in meeting rooms. Attenders came from Mexico and Guatemala, California, Nevada, Hawaii, and several other parts of the United States.

This Epistle shares some expressions and revelations of the Spirit moving amid Friends at this summer's gathering. We sought to listen carefully to what has been said, to hear what is between the words, and to understand what is deeply felt. This experiment, called **Beloved Community Part II: Centering the Voices of the Next Generation**, prompts us to recognize the ministries present and emerging among us. We shared worship, plenaries, affinity and interest groups, worship sharing, and Bible study. We listened and learned, walked, heard birds and frogs, swam, played games, sang, ate, washed dishes, connected and celebrated together.

Youthful Friends Sophia Faith Cantu and Nora Lisette Cooke (who grew up in our Yearly Meeting) led the main plenary. The Biblical text was Romans 12:1-8, 11 which includes, "but be transformed by the renewing of the mind so that you may discern what is the will of God – good and acceptable and perfect..." They alerted us that their words may bring discomfort for some, and that the plenary would be filled with prayer. As Quakers, we have no first communions, confirmations or bar mitzvahs, yet, no matter our age, we thirst for ceremony to mark milestones in our growth. Faith and Nora led us through a 5-step ritual ceremony of: acknowledging the old; letting it go; pausing in the Gap (liminal, uncertain, undefined); bringing in the new; and celebrating through prayer and dancing. Ministry included exhortations and queries: What holds us back from continuing revelation? What will allow us to be released from bonds that no longer serve us? What is holding our container strong, what is holding us back from continuing revelation? How can we reach out and ask for help? Is thee faithful? Does thee yield? Pray with music and movement. Commune with Christ in ways that push our boundaries. Move through muddy layers to bring in the new. Replace judgement with genuine curiosity. What holds us back? How can we: discern what is to keep and let go; sustain what is to keep; nourish and support what is rising?

As we lean into the future, we struggle visibly and viscerally with crowded agendas, dwindling numbers to fill committees, and differing generational perspectives. Worship and discussions about the future of the yearly meeting are pressed for time. Full business agendas are not conducive to intergenerational participation, and leave little time and energy for connections among age groups. We need to re-emphasize our commitment to the testimony of Simplicity.

In the Junior Yearly Meeting (JYM) program, a friendly responsible adult presence (FRAP) observed how quickly bonds are built through simple acts, such as clerks reaching out to check in on each of their peers, participating in service together, and playing community-building games. Staff support each other. Bodies are depleted of energy, but hearts are full of love.

At the Memorial Plenary, as each name was read, we mourned the expected and unexpected passing of Friends, and celebrated their lives and how they touched ours. What will become of the roles they filled? Maybe Spirit intends some of our current work to be laid down, or picked up by newly convinced adults, rather than laid on the shoulders of our youth.

Even with our imperfections, we can be present and **receptive to continuing revelation**. With continuing revelation, our structures, activities and words may change. For example, what if we use PazYM as the abbreviation for our Yearly Meeting? Exchanging one letter and shifting the vowel sound from ã (as in “pack”) to ä (as in “ahh”) changes a truncated word that *means* Peaceful to the entire word, “Paz” meaning “Peace” in Spanish. Many members of our Yearly Meeting reside where Spanish is widely spoken.

We continue to experience the wounding of racism. We pray for guidance and support for reckoning with and healing hurts and harms. Met and unmet needs bring up feelings! Conflict and struggles present us with opportunities to pursue deeper understanding.

As we grasp for how to address freshly activated pain, we can refer to the Pacific Yearly Meeting [*Sacred Space Healing Harm Process*](#) document, to try this process and build on this work. We need help to trust each other, especially where trust has been strained or broken.

Undergirding all of our inner and outward commotion is the practice of being present with the Living Spirit. We are grateful for those among us who sit quietly, ministering by holding our body, our community of faith, in Love and Light.

Friends come to yearly meeting with diverse identities, life experiences and faith traditions--Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, theist and non-theist. The Religious Society of Friends is an experimental religion. The research in which we participate honors what others know and what we know ourselves.

Experience of a transcendent, non-material reality is at the core of our faith. Beliefs are the “clothes” we put on that experience. What is inside is essential. As we move in community and deepen our faith, Experience is key, and Love is essential.

Still, we need appropriate “clothing” to live and move in our contexts of community, culture and climate, and to engage in the work we are each called to do in our time and place. Our sacred work needs both qualities of character and practical skills, with Friends’ Testimonies: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, Stewardship or Sustainability (SPICES) as guides to our discernment and decision-making.

We exclaim, sometimes laughing with joyful surprise, at the Truth that comes to us through another Friend. We remain open to the continuing revelation of Truth and Light, as we affirm the presence of the Living Spirit of God in each of us.

Laura Magnani, Presiding Clerk
on behalf of Pacific Yearly Meeting