

Epistle from Lake Erie Yearly Meeting in annual sessions at Bluffton University in Bluffton, Ohio, July 30-August 2, 2015

Loving greetings to Friends everywhere.

The Friends of Lake Erie Yearly Meeting met in annual sessions on the pleasant campus of Bluffton University to “Sow the Seeds of Friendship.” We were 109 adults and 24 youth and children, representing meetings from Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. In our workshops, worship groups, informal gatherings and, most especially, our plenary session, we have explored the deeper meanings of friendship and its transformative power.

Nine Friends met for two days prior to our business sessions to work on a service project with Habitat for Humanity. The group volunteered at Habitat’s ReStore in Findlay, Ohio, cleaning donated furniture and building materials, testing donated appliances, stuffing bags for contest giveaways, and crafting a marquee for a local road rally. We were very impressed by Habitat’s dedicated staff and local volunteers, who have made significant contributions to the community in the 15 years the Findlay affiliate has been in operation. We are grateful that our service projects build friendship among us while providing assistance to organizations doing important work in the region where we meet.

We listened to the work of our task force on sexual abuse policy with appreciation for the care they have taken in considering a topic that often elicits deeply emotional responses. They presented us with a clear framework for further discernment of what we need to do to achieve a balance of safety and freedom for our young people and those who work with them. We are mindful of how far our meeting has come from our first pain-driven responses when we heard of an incident of sexual abuse among us. This led us to form the task force, and we are grateful for this opportunity to demonstrate our way of showing true friendship.

We heard of the sad duty of Green Pastures Quarterly Meeting as it confronts the need to lay down the Friends School in Detroit. After 50 years of service to the Detroit community, the school has become financially unsustainable. This has been a source of friction for some time among the Michigan Friends who make up the quarter. The closing of a school is always emotional, always personal. We share in their sense of loss, for this school has been much loved and admired. But Friends in Michigan have shown their understanding of the deeper meaning of friendship as they’ve reached unity on this difficult matter.

Our plenary speaker, Merry Stanford, was no stranger to us, having served as clerk of our meeting and made countless other contributions. She delivered a wonderful address on “Unconventional Joy: The Scandalous Ministry of Befriending.” Her talk was a far-ranging meditation on friendship and the power it has to create true community. At times her talk was deeply intimate and personal as Merry shared with us five “teachers,” incidents in her life that have shown her the folly of carrying “20-ton shields” called perfectionism, timidity, righteousness and strong desire intended to fend off “the other.” She reminded us how scandalous it was when early Friends refused to carry the 20-ton shields of the day, such as by not taking off their hats, according equal status to men and women, and inviting men and women of disparate classes to worship together. Merry led us deep into the science of the brain and its structure as she showed the intimate power of neural networks we are only beginning to understand and challenged us to use the scandalous, barrier-breaking power of friendship to multiply the networks of friendship among us in our meetings and in the wider world.

Merry reminded us that as Friends we have adequate desire for peace but inadequate skills, and that for the very survival of our species we must see others as of “our tribe.” This means we are required to be unilaterally vulnerable by opening ourselves to the other, for which we need

the support of a spiritual practice. As we become more inwardly spacious, she promised, we will be able to extend our loving gaze to everyone.

Our Bible study and worship sharing groups helped us to grow our understanding of Jesus' command to live as friends and more deeply appreciate how friendships have changed our understanding of the world. Our time reflecting on John 15:9-17 has renewed our commitment to the charge set forth in verse 12: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."

The rich programming offered this year included packets of actual seeds, which we have given each other as tokens of the friendships we have sown together. We trust we've also begun to sow seeds that will grow rich conversations in our meetings about topics like white privilege, how to develop social change ministry, how Friends can support prison outreach, and how we can work to address the pressing concern of global climate change. We are grateful to our presenters for challenging us to bring our faith into action. As we begin plans for the coming year, we are challenged by Ministry and Nurture, who offered a query that will call our meetings and each of us as Friends to examine current events as they pertain to racial justice and police killings and to respond as meetings and as individuals.

With gratitude for the enduring witness to the power of friendship that is the Religious Society of Friends,

Sally Weaver Sommer, clerk