

## **Epistle to all Friends**

### **Lake Erie Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends**

**July 30-Aug 2, 2020**

Greetings to Friends Everywhere!

We, Lake Erie Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, gathered from July 30 through August 2, in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, and other locations including Maine and Honduras, with a final business session on August 12, 2020. Although our physical gathering was limited mostly to groups of one or two, collectively 155 of us worshipped, carried out our business, and played together using the online platforms of Zoom and Minecraft. Our theme this weekend was, "Letting Go: Listening with Whole Hearts and Open Minds.

#### **Letting Go**

In the midst of a world health pandemic that separates us from each other and a new awakening to the depth and breadth of our longstanding racial pandemic, we found comfort in in seeing each other through Zoom, and in the LEYM routines we love. We began some days with bible study and worship sharing, we delighted in our beloved talent show, and envied our youngest children who were able to gather in person. While familiar and comforting, letting go of the physically gathered nature of these routines also created new opportunities. A number of Friends who cannot normally attend a physical gathering due to cost, mobility, time, or other reasons, were able to join us this year for the first (or first in a long) time. Our talent show this year included a number of favorite and familiar acts including several musical performances, but we were also treated to a video walk-through of one Friend's garden, exploration of a Minecraft world and occupied by our Youth Program during annual sessions this year, to paintings, an HTML animation, and some scrollwork pieces of art created during the talent show.

We are excited about the possibility that the technology we used out of necessity this year will enhance our work going forward. We are grateful for the skilled and cheerful wizardry that made Zoom our Bluffton this year, and for inspiring musical interludes from Playing for Change. We are also grateful for the thoughtful planning of a Minecraft world which held our Youth Program, and for the gifts and flexibility of all of those serving our community during this time of unexpected challenges. While we are eager to meet together physically in the future, letting go of the need to meet exclusively in person opens up exciting opportunities for ongoing bible study, year-round Minecraft connections among our youth, and for breathing new life into our Earthcare and Peace and Justice Committees as they explore offering a series of free-standing interest groups during the coming year.

## **Listening with Whole Hearts**

Our bible study group explored the biblical treatment of 5 words from our theme: listening, whole, minds, hearts, and being open. Participants shared their personal experiences, and also reflected on William Penn's view that it is not our own salvation we are seeking, but that of the beloved community.

We heard, again, of brokenness in our beloved community. Racism is a pandemic that predates and exacerbates the COVID 19 pandemic, it is more deadly than COVID 19 to People of Color.

Friends of Color, in an epistle written to Friends everywhere asked us for respite. "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." These dear friends ask us to "do work so that" Friends of Color in our midst "can BREATHE."

Friends in the antiracism workshop expressed frustration with our meetings' lack of meaningful progress in becoming anti-racist faith communities. The barriers Friends identified are cultural and financial, some limiting our ability to attract attenders, some impacting our work in local communities. Those participating in the workshop expressed a commitment to this work and to continue to have brave conversations, set bold goals and listen to our Black neighbors and Friends in order to understand our blind spots.

As one step toward becoming more anti-racist, we were encouraged in our bystander intervention workshop to listen with whole hearts to situations involving racism we encounter, to explore what makes us hesitant to intervene, to make our presence as a witness known, and to follow the lead of the individual(s) being harassed.

But we must do more. When our Friends of Color are exhausted not only from interactions in the world at large, but from being othered in Quaker space, we are not doing enough. We encourage all friends, including those in our constituent monthly meetings, to read "the outgoing epistle of the 2020 Virtual Annual Pre-Gathering of Friends of Color and their Families," to sit with the queries they pose to all Quakers, and to do more.

## **Open Minds**

In the Listening through Relationship workshop, we were called to open our minds to explore what imprisons us – and to ponder where we might be led if we shifted our thinking about our relationship with the earth – to explore what would be different if we treated water and its interaction with land as sacred?

Our workshop on Connecting with Nature as a Spiritual Practice encouraged us to find more in nature than its beauty by exploring outdoor forms of meditation including simply walking or

sitting in nature to attentive observation, active listening, restoration work, gardening, play, and activism. We were reminded that among nature's spiritual gifts is its profound memento mori, its reminder that all living things must die, and that in these "good deaths" new life is made possible.

A staff member from FCNL encouraged us to open our minds to the power of storytelling as political advocacy, leading us through the steps of identifying and crafting stories we might share as a step to building personal relationships with our members of Congress as we work to heal the world.

We were enriched by our time together, challenged to do more to explore and mend our relationship with the earth, and to more actively address the historic and ongoing racial pandemic within our Quaker communities, and more broadly. We long for the physical connections that were absent this year, but leave excited by new possibilities for broadening and deepening our community using the tools that allowed us to meet this year.

In faith,

Josephine Posti, LEYM Clerk, Pittsburgh Friends Meeting