

**Lake Erie Yearly Meeting
Annual Sessions Epistle
July 27-31, 2022 Held Virtually**

To Friends Everywhere:

Lake Erie Yearly Meeting gathered virtually for our annual sessions July 27 through July 31 considering our theme “Many Roots One Tree.” More than 130 Friends met for Bible study, expectant worship and worship sharing, business sessions, workshops, panels on various Quaker organizations, a plenary on our theme led by Christian Acemah, Head of Olney Friends School in Ohio, lunchtime chat groups, and a family-friendly evening of entertainment.

We launched right into our theme on Wednesday evening. The clerk of our Program Committee, Susan Hartman, inspired us to consider the multilayered dimensions of the metaphor, “Many Roots, One Tree,” citing the pervasive, timeless symbolism of the tree across many cultures and through countless generations.

Our opening session featured an interactive roll call where our monthly meetings shared their “story trees:” short histories of how their meetings took root in local communities throughout Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania. We learned about Friends who helped each meeting grow and how their roots of social justice and spiritual development have supported the new growth that hybrid worship and today’s equity movements demand.

As our gathering moved through times of worship and learning, panel discussions and meetings for worship with attention to business, we found the images of a tree and roots to be both expansive and foundational, expertly woven through all we did together.

Roots, of course, are often thought of as our past—our individual childhood experiences, the places we come from, the culture we are a part of, our deep grounding values, the anchor that holds us in place. Yet roots of a tree are also alive and growing; they are the sources through which nourishment of water and minerals are absorbed from the soil, stored, and distributed to the rest of the tree. We know that roots can even serve as a means of communication or information between trees.

Our metaphor throughout the gathering often focused on the roots, but we also were reminded that they are not the only sources of the tree's nutrition. The whole tree, including the roots themselves, are also nourished by the sugar that is produced in the leaves, through photosynthesis, using the sun's energy and carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This sugar—the tree's food – is stored in all parts of the tree and feeds the roots so they can do their work. In this complex system, each part of the tree relies on the others to maintain its health and growth.

As we considered ourselves and our organization, the metaphor seemed to expand before us, and grew to include not only the roots, trunk, branches, and leaves but also the sun—the source

of light – that allows the tree to grow and produce food. Only with this light can the tree live and bear fruit.

The theme of new growth and our deep, intertwined roots, unfolded in various ways during the week. In the keynote talk on Friday evening, Christian Acemah asked us to think together about “What Lies within this Tree with Many Roots?” He encouraged us to explore with him the questions: “What makes a nourishing, vibrant inside? What do we need to cultivate Spirit-led approaches to address apparent, latent, and emergent threats to the tree's internal health?” Our two worship sharing times on Friday and Saturday considered the queries: “How do I experience the roots of my spiritual growth? How do we nurture our collective spiritual growth?” Our Bible study, led by April Vanlonden, considered first the Bible as a whole, our complex relationship to it as Quakers, our roots in it, both beautiful and “messy” and why, in American culture today, we are wise to know something about the Bible and not to simply “ditch it.” We also explored the Exodus story, which is deeply rooted in many cultures and understood from radically different perspectives, several of which we looked at together.

The ten workshops on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday offered opportunities to stretch and expand our exploration of the theme, from the physical roots of gardening to exploring Quaker family trees; re-creating our “grounding roots” of public safety, conflict resolution, and peacemaking; exploring the roots of our personal, spiritual journeys; considering the health and integrity of the whole “tree”-- individual or organizational.

In a slightly new format this year, many of us attended three different panel sessions. Each panel introduced several Quaker organizations, with a representative of each organization briefly presenting a summary of the “roots and fruits” of the organization, with time for more in-depth information in separate break-out rooms.

We’ve explored creative ways to bring together our younger and older Friends during the pandemic. In addition to our annual evening of intergenerational entertainment, we again provided space within Minecraft for our middle and high school-aged Friends and young adult Friends to meet, build and explore together.

Some of the most significant decisions we discerned during our time together are seeds for our future. Our ad hoc Site & Arrangements Committee has worked faithfully this year to identify a new location for our annual sessions and we’re excited to share our plans to hold the 2023 annual meeting at Ashland University in Ohio from June 15-18. Just as planting a seed requires sun, rain and protection, we see this decision as an opportunity to discern how we can better support Friends in affordability, whether we might spread business sessions across multiple times throughout the year, starting with the 2023 annual meeting, and how we can create more intergenerational programming at our annual meetings. We approach planning our 2023 sessions with the excitement of a gardener sorting fresh packets of seeds, overlooking a tilled bed, ready to support this season’s sprouts.

Throughout our many deep explorations of the tree and root metaphor, we were inspired to consider the solid, nourishing roots under and around us as a Yearly Meeting. Epistles from other Yearly Meetings, interwoven through our time together, helped us both center our souls and remind us of Friends beyond us, of our roots and branches reaching across miles and time, belovedly entwined. Explorations of the images of gardening, of seeds and new growth provided firm foundation for our deep dives into life after the realities of Covid and offered hope throughout our considerations of the many present, urgent challenges before us as part of the global faith community.

We send on to other Yearly Meetings our assurances of Light and all that nourishes the roots and branches that connect us. We take with us the sense of having been deeply nourished by our time together and of carrying renewed visions of hope for vitality and growth in our future.

Susan Loucks, Presiding Clerk
Lake Erie Yearly Meeting