

## Southeastern Yearly Meeting EPISTLE 2021

*Greetings Friends,*

Our Yearly Meeting Gathering has come at a time when it is needed most. The enthusiasm for being together was evident; Friends found such joy in being together again, even if it was on Zoom. Registration was as high as our in-person Gathering, with 149 adults and youth attending online events that were spread out over twelve days. We welcomed many visitors from other Yearly Meetings and Quaker organizations--- from New York to California.

After a year of pandemic, social isolation and upheaval, we came together as a Yearly Meeting community with the theme *'What Now?'* Over the last year, we have changed. We have become different people. We have lived through loss, isolation, and having our lives and our communities disrupted. But there has been positive change as well. Friends have used this time of separation and solitude for spiritual growth, for deepening their spiritual practices, and renewing the witness that grows out of our faith.

Our Monthly Meetings and Worship Groups are looking forward to re-opening---but how? In our Monthly Meeting Forum, we heard that in the last year of meeting on Zoom, meetings have gained new attenders and members, while losing touch with others and grieving the loss of dear members to COVID. Some Meetings are moving ahead with becoming 'hybrid' meetings; some wonder how many people their space will hold with social distancing; some have had small groups gathering for worship outdoors, and others are looking for new worship space. Can we view the disruptions we have experienced as opportunities to try something new?

In our two retreats, led by Emily Provance, we learned that we need to tell our stories of living through multiple crises - COVID, racism, climate change, the election and insurrection, economic inequality, misinformation - again and again to put them in perspective. In the first retreat, *'Interruptions,'* we broke into small groups to share our most vivid memories from the last year. In the second retreat, *'Integrations,'* in small groups we considered who we were 13 months ago, compared to who we are now. Emily cautioned us [that](#) 'we are starting to make decisions about life after the pandemic, and without reflection, we'll go back to the way we were.'

We also shared stories of our spiritual journeys during the pandemic in worship sharing and in *'Awakening from Spiritual Lethargy.'* Friends have taken the social isolation as an opportunity to adopt helpful spiritual practices and daily rituals, such as trying new things, mindfulness, gratitude, intentional keeping in touch and bringing joy to others, being in nature, prayer and meditation.

This last year we have witnessed an awakening to the profound effects that racism has had on our country and ourselves. Some Friends and Meetings have joined groups such as Black Lives Matter, the NAACP, and other organizations, and have also been engaged in learning and reflection on racism. We feel strengthened in our commitment to equity, justice, and becoming an anti-racist community. FCNL staff led an amazing workshop - *'F/friends Reckoning with Racism, Justice Reform, and Election Integrity'* - a comprehensive presentation covering the historical foundations of systemic racism, its current forms, FCNL's work, and what Friends can do about it. In *'Mirrors of Identity: Personal Reflections on Racial Experience,'* the Committee for Ministry on Racism created a safe place for all Friends to reflect together on their early memories and life experiences with race. In Affinity Groups, one for Black, Indigenous, & People

Of Color (BIPOC), and one for Friends of European descent, we shared our stories of racism and what actions we are taking to build an anti-racist society.

During this year of social isolation, Friends have taken the opportunity to become more connected with nature, deepening our sense of the need to protect her. We shared our memories and experiences of nature in All Ages Worship Sharing. The songs of birds in our backyards, shared over Zoom, brought the presence of nature into our morning worship. In *'What Now for Earthcare in SEYM,'* Friends heard about three critical issues in our region, and considered what actions we can take. There is a lot of enthusiasm to do more work together going forward.

In our plenaries and Executive Committee meetings, we learned that some committees have been able to meet online during the pandemic, while others have not. The Peace and Social Concerns committee, which meets monthly on Zoom, has seen an increase in participation. Our Field Secretary for Earthcare has been very active, with virtual visits to Meetings, giving presentations, and connecting with a myriad of Quaker organizations, environmental organizations, and interfaith groups. We were inspired by hearing the latest news from visiting representatives from AFSC, FCNL, FGC, and Quaker House. We adopted a minute, brought forward by the Committee for Ministry on Racism, to support the establishment of a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding Schools. We also heard sad news that a member, who attended our YM many years ago, was arrested for sexual abuse of a minor. While we know of no incidents within our Yearly Meeting, we spent time carefully discerning how to respond to this news and care for any who may have been subject to abuse as children.

We celebrated being together with some light-hearted fun and fellowship with several intergenerational events, including Laughter Yoga, the Talent Show, Playback Theater, and Quaker Bakers. Audrey Greenhall, Bookstore Manager for FGC Quakerbooks, joined us to chat about books, and provided SEYM with a 'Virtual Booktable.' Two opportunities for open fellowship were also added to our schedule. Teens and Young Adults attended *'Who am I going to be?'*--- two sessions with Emily Provance --- where they had rich discussions about spiritual gifts, what they are, how to know what yours are, and how they work in community.

Being together in person is such a vital need for young people. Over this last year, our youth have felt disconnected. The Youth Committee is searching for ways to help them re-connect with our community, and is starting to plan in-person events that can be done safely.

Friends were deeply moved by the Walton Lecture, *'Interruption, Integration, Transfiguration,'* presented by Emily Provance. Emily spoke out of the silence on how people process and adapt to crises, change, and uncertainty; and she offered some 'next steps' in taking care of ourselves, our community, and society. Understanding the impact of what we've lived through this last year will take time to reflect and tell our stories. She talked about Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs,' and how we first need to care for ourselves and members of our community with food and rest, security and identity, friendship and love. Simple acts of love and kindness have tremendous power to overcome extremism and divisions in our society; but we cannot meet those who distrust us (and who we distrust) with empathy - we cannot love our enemies - if our own basic needs are not met.

**What Now?** A quote from the lecture speaks to our condition:

*"We're not called to be the people we were before;  
we're called to be the people we are becoming."*