

Epistle NYYM 2020

To Friends Everywhere,

We send our love and concern to you in this unprecedented time of the pandemics of racism and the corona virus, from lands belonging to the Matinecock and Shinnecock, the Lenni Lenape, the Haudenosaunee, and the Abenaki peoples. New York Yearly Meeting met for two weeks this July with a full schedule of online events: meetings for business, social meals, affinity groups, interest groups, worship sharing groups, Young Adult Friends groups, activities for children. Registration did not include any donation, and 393 people registered, of which 111 were first-timers, 17 were youth, and 61 were young adults.

Each of our business meetings was preceded by a full hour of worship, which centered us in order to attend to our concerns with enough patience and quiet to stay in touch with each other in this new virtual space. We needed that time. We were first challenged by the Epistle from the FGC Pre-Gathering Retreat for Friends of Color, a community which allows those Friends “the rare opportunity of not being othered in Quaker space.” White Friends have so much work to do, and this epistle gave us some queries to wrestle with: “How can we encourage the support of Friends of Color in Quaker worship and meetings around the world? How can Friends de-center themselves in order to listen to and hear Friends of Color? How can I support respite for Friends of Color?”

At our plenary Friend Angela Hopkins, of the Friends Center for Racial Justice (FCRJ), asked us to consider the query, “How can we contribute to building a faithful, more inclusive community?” She showed us that building an anti-racist structure requires inward work as well as outward. Our General Secretary Steve Mohlke told us we were wrong to ask ourselves, “How can I help the Friends Center for Racial Justice?” The real question, Steve said, was “How can the FCRJ help us?” WE are the work the FCRJ needs to do. We can build a multicultural community that does not center whiteness and privilege, but we have a lot of work to do.

Our part-time Young Adult Field Secretary reported on her work among that community. One new initiative was a Mentoring Program which paired young adults with older Friends to nurture each other’s spiritual lives. She told us that 26% of NYYM young adults have lost their jobs due to the corona virus pandemic. We have been trying for three years to allocate enough money for a full-time position for children, youth, and young adults, so far with no success. We recognize that we are othering young Friends. They are not only our future; they are also our present. Can we trust the Light to lead us toward inclusion here, too?

We began some of the work we have before us. We authorized our clerk to send a letter to Governor Cuomo, asking for early release, clemency, and no solitary confinement for New York State prisoners in this time of Covid19. There will be letters to follow to the Governors of New Jersey and Connecticut. Our Black Concerns Committee has formed

three action study groups to address structural racism: Advocating for College behind Bars, Disrupt the School to Prison Pipeline, and Racial Justice and Anti-Racism Resources. One of our meetings proposed to change the beginning of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution to read: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction,” omitting the exception for “punishment for crime.”

Friends, there is much work to do. But, as our Black Concerns Committee reminds us, “Our hearts are heavy but our Spirit is strong.”