

A Report on Quaker Epistles

Prepared for the 2021 annual meeting of SCYMF by Julie Peyton, West Hills Friends

An Epistle articulates a collective sense of experience and how God has moved among Friends during a gathering, be it a yearly meeting session or an FWCC Section meeting, or a Young Friends gathering. It is approved by that group during a meeting for business... It was historically, and continues to be, an important way for Friends and others to learn about each other in that which is eternal. They help us appreciate that we are part of a world family of Friends.

From <http://fwcc.world/epistles-from-quaker-groups-from-around-the-world>

Last year (2020), SCYMF did not write an epistle. This year, an “official” Committee will have the task of sensing where/when the Holy Spirit has shown up and moved us during our time together, and then writing that experience to share with “all Friends everywhere.” If approved by the business meeting, that record of our time together will be sent out. In olden times, it would have been a page or two sent with an envelope and stamp. These days, Epistles are typically sent to and collated by Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC; note the website above).

I have taken some time to read Epistles sent from other Quaker gatherings, and to summarize what I have learned, and to include some excerpts. The link at the end of the opening paragraph above will take you to a website where you may read them in full.

But I start with the Epistle from Britain YM in its entirety, dated November 2020:

To all Friends everywhere

“The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.” (Proverbs 19:21, NRSV)

This letter of greeting comes to you in a year when so many plans have been disrupted, along with our ways of working and of meeting. We had planned a week- long gathering for up to 2000 Friends of all ages to worship and build community, and to discern leadings for our yearly meeting on “Listening, prophecy and reconciliation: allyship in a climate emergency”. We had hoped to welcome among us many Friends from other yearly meetings. Instead, due to the coronavirus pandemic and continued uncertainty over what would be possible, our Yearly Meeting is short, held by electronic means, and for only necessary business and to worship together.

Nevertheless, our greetings to you all are as warm and loving as always. We have been learning again the importance of faithfulness in keeping our meetings and building our Quaker communities, whilst discovering new and unexpected ways to connect and worship together. One hundred years since the first world gathering of Friends came together to affirm a worldwide opposition to war and to building the social conditions for peace, we are thankful to belong to our world family.

The issues of privilege and climate injustice, which have been exercising our yearly meeting, are still urgent. Inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the response to it. Tackling systemic racism is a spiritual imperative. The impact of changes in the climate grows. Work and learning on these issues continues around our yearly meeting.

In these extraordinary and challenging times, we have seen that it is possible to make changes in our way of life. We have hope. We trust that the leadings of love and truth will come right.

Quakers around the globe are struggling with racism and colonialism, war and disease, ecological damage and the dangers of climate change, and our own peculiar divisions of theology and practice. No Epistle expressed hopelessness, and most spoke of actual work being done, large and small. Here's a quote from the Europe and Middle East Section of FWCC, where the "They" refers to friends in the West Bank city of Ramallah:

They asked us to consider the relationship between charity which alleviates suffering, and social justice which addresses its causes. *FWCC EMES 2021*

And from Ireland YM:

We were reminded that the connection between faith and action has been a constant feature of Quaker witness and challenged as to how we take forward our Testimonies of peace, equality and simplicity in our own Meetings. *Ireland YM 2021*

Thus the theme I noted most was this dance between Action (the outward motion) & faith (the inward motion).

It is especially delightful to read Epistles from young Friends and junior Friends. For example, Australia, Baltimore, and Ohio Valley YMs often send an epistle from the elementary-aged children's gathering. The 2020 Epistle from Baltimore included a long and excellent Epistle from their Young Adult Friends (YAFs). It is also a delight to see familiar names showing up in another's epistle; Jade Souza was mentioned in Cuba YM's as a visitor in 2020!

I close this report with a quote from Canadian YM's 2020 Epistle:

We reach out to Friends across the world to greet Friends in these times of uncertainty, separation, disruption, and the challenge of new ways. It is a time of both death and rebirth, and offers many positive things as well as hardship. This is a richly fertile time of change and transformation, looking at what is essential and what we are ready to do away with (both in our daily lives and within society). We need to prime ourselves and build our resilience to do the hard but necessary work ahead of us, addressing the many injustices of racism, poverty, sexism, LGBTQ+ issues, the environmental crisis, and other concerns which, as we re-form a new world, may we approach with new energy and commitment. May we step into true activism by letting

our lives speak. As we move through the dark times of a pandemic, may we find the Light ever present in our lives, drawing us together.