



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
— OF FRIENDS —
QUAKERS

2024 General Epistle

To Friends Everywhere,

Grace and peace to you, in the love that flows from the Holy One who longs to help us know and live our unity with our human kindred and with all Creation!

New England Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends gathered for its 364th annual meeting at Castleton, Vermont, and by video conference, from August 2nd through 7th, 2024. We acknowledge with humility and gratitude that we met on Ndakinna (n-DAH-kee-NAH), homeland of the Abenaki peoples. It was a joy to hear from Jorge Luis Reyna, presiding clerk of Cuba Yearly Meeting and to have the presence of Cuban Friends by video conference.

As we came together, we were acutely aware that our world is in turmoil. Armed conflicts in Israel/Palestine, Ukraine, Sudan, and other places are inflicting fear and suffering on millions. Oppressive regimes burden millions more. As climate change accelerates, we live with grief because of the wounds to the natural world that we love. As our days together unfolded, the sometimes-stormy weather in Castleton reflected these impacts of climate change, which have resulted in recent disastrous flooding here, especially in the “Northeast Kingdom” of Vermont, where we have beloved Friends.

We acknowledge our participation in many of the world’s crises, such as climate change, political polarization, and the continued effects of white supremacy. There has been turmoil within our yearly meeting as well, as differences have arisen on many points, for example during our discernment about the creation of a new meeting. We have felt the need to strengthen our capacity for conflict response.

Yet we affirm the joy and consolation of our community in the Spirit, within New England and beyond. We are glad to see our Friends new and old, and as we have centered together in worship, we are glad also to welcome the evidence of God’s work within and among us. The One who speaks, Creator-Sets-Free, is our steadfast companion, whose guidance we listen for, and whose love we strive to embody, however incompletely. When we accept that we are loved, we are strengthened to address our conflicts and our complicity in the ills of our society.

Our Bible Half Hour speaker, Genna Ulrich, of Portland Friends Meeting, reminded us how important it is to accept one another fully, even one who at first does not seem to belong, like John the Baptizer, clothed in unshorn camel-hide and eating locusts and honey. In being able to do this, we reflect in our measure the radical way that God accepts and loves each of us. Our experience of this love allows us to better hear the Good News and change our purpose to better align with the divine ordering, the Gospel Order.

Our plenary speaker, Lloyd Lee Wilson, of Friendship Friends Meeting, North Carolina YM(C), reminded us of the many, sometimes wordless, ways that the Divine speaks to us. He described his experience of the “spirituality of subtraction,” a practice by which we find ourselves gradually freed from distracting habits and unexamined assumptions. This makes it easier to hear the messages we are given by the One who speaks, God-With-Us, even if we are led in ways we do not at first understand.

We also were reminded that faithfulness to the leadings we are given, even when we see no great effects, is humble participation in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. In our time together, sharing reports of our experiences of the Spirit’s gifts has given us courage and led us to see the many ways in which we need to grow in the love and power of the divine life if we are to respond, in our measure, to the challenges before us, within our community as well as in the world.

We continue our efforts to understand ways in which we enact the patterns of oppression that express the values of the culture in which we are embedded, a culture which places differential values on humans, the children of God, according to race or gender expression, class, education, or age. We long to be perfect in love, as Jesus calls us to be, and to respond humbly to others, but we remain beginners, apprentices in the school of the spirit that is Quakerism, struggling to apply the lessons of love, even with those near to us, where trust and forgiveness ought to be in richest supply.

The work of repairing relationships with those we have harmed is even more challenging and requires greater humility. For example, this year we heard from Friends who presented a report on the complicity of New England Yearly Meeting in the great harms inflicted by the so-called Indian Boarding Schools. The report found that New England Friends were deeply, directly, and intimately involved in the creation and material sustenance of these assimilating boarding schools and the policies that drove and justified them. We encouraged the reporting Friends to continue their work and explore what next steps we may take as way opens.

We have come to recognize that many structures and practices in our meetings at every level must be renewed or transformed if they are to help us listen to the Spirit and act in faithfulness. We hope to listen more to young and old, newcomers and old-timers, to tend their seeds of Spirit and encourage the use of their gifts. Such changes in practice and habit are unsettling, and can bring conflict. Experimental living in community requires patience, forbearance, and the healing flashes of divine humor as we try and fail, improvise and revise.

We can know that we are walking with the Guide by the growing beauty and freedom of the way we are led, the fearlessness with which we love and act, the growing scope of our gratitude. Not all at once will we come to maturity in that Spirit; not all at once will we acknowledge where we have fallen short, or be able truly to forgive or accept our need for forgiveness. Genna Ulrich reminded us of Jesus’ teaching that only God is good, and challenged us to avoid the easy assumption that because we’re Quakers, we are “good people”—rather than examining our actual behaviors and effects in the world.

But we are reminded this week that the blessings we have—among them our children, our friends, the abundant Creation, and the resources of the Quaker way—are bread for the journey, deriving from the divine Seed whom we cherish so dearly. Knowing this, the call and the need for radical transformation are invitations to meaning, and to joy. We recall with hope God’s prophetic assertion: *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?* (Isaiah 43:19 NRSV). Alleluia!

Yours In Faith and Love,

New England Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. Rebecca Leuchak". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rebecca Leuchak, Presiding Clerk