

**Epistle from Lake Erie Yearly Meeting
in Annual Sessions at Bluffton University
Bluffton, Ohio, July 26-29, 2018**

To Friends Everywhere:

Some 100 adult Friends and 29 young ones aged 18 months to 18 years gathered in community to explore the theme of Building the Beloved Community and ponder the question, Who is My Neighbor? We enjoyed eight workshops; daily sessions of worship sharing, spiritual practice, and Bible study; a talent show; and a dynamic plenary address. We appreciated the fact that the food service staff at Bluffton University adapted their offerings to reflect our concern for and dedication to care of the earth.

We formed a committee to help guide us to a policy on sexual harassment among adult Friends that will complement our policy protecting young adults and children, already in place. We approved a minute presented by the Peace & Justice Committee, urging the United States to reverse its opposition and ratify the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, as all the world's nations that are not burdened with such weapons have done. The U.S. must join that beloved community.

Northern Ohio poured out perfect summer weather: sunny, breezy, and not too hot. Orderly business meetings apprised us of our own committees' work, and visitors from the Earlham School of Religion, the American Friends Service Committee, and Friends Committee on National Legislation updated us on their work. Our finances remain solid. The helpful and friendly staff of Bluffton University served good food, and there was plenty of ice cream.

Without our plenary speaker to lovingly remind us of what we could too easily have let ourselves forget, we could have been all too comfortable passing a pleasant weekend together and enjoying a respite from the many political, social, cultural, environmental, and personal challenges in our lives. But Yvette Shipman of Pittsburgh Monthly Meeting has a unique gift for being simultaneously welcoming and challenging. She quickly earned our affection and trust, and used that connection to challenge us.

"If something feels uncomfortable, lean into it," she told us in her talk entitled "Practice Justice and Being in Relationship with One Another." "We make ourselves stay put when we should go," she warned us.

In an exercise called "Crossing the Line," she led us outside. Under the kindly summer skies we formed a large circle. As Friends called out "I identify as White," or "I have experienced hunger as a child," people for whom that was true moved into the center of the circle, or, if unable to do so because of the terrain, otherwise indicated their inclusion. This exercise reminded us of truths we have long known about liberal unprogrammed Quakerism: we are predominantly White, overwhelmingly college-educated, mostly heterosexual and cis-gendered, and mostly middle-class.

But the exercise also revealed to us things that are often invisible: when people who had a life-changing disability were asked to move to the center, for instance, there were three or four people whose mobility devices announced their disability, but just as many whose disabilities

were not marked on the body or indicated by the use of a cane, a wheelchair, or other aid. College drop-outs; people who had been homeless; single parents; people who identified as queer; people who had been sexually abused: here, too, the invisible was made visible.

As a Friend noticed, “Whether I was observing who was in the circle, or being in the circle, I felt it was all sacred space, a covered space. It felt like worship.”

By coming to share her gifts and insights with us, Friend Yvette showed us what it looks like when someone steps into their discomfort to promote justice and build relationship. Some Friends, like Yvette, who is Black, need not make a special effort to be among people who look, and are, different. Others of us, who have the privilege and comfort that come from being among the familiar nearly everywhere we go, need to step up, and step into relationship. “Quakers are uniquely situated to do this,” Yvette told us. “Y’all have no excuse.”

Signed in and for Lake Erie Yearly Meeting,

Nancy Reeves, presiding clerk