



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
— OF FRIENDS —
QUAKERS

To Friends Everywhere:

Greetings from the 363rd annual sessions of New England Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, held at Castleton, Vermont, and online August 5-9th, 2023. We acknowledge with humility and gratitude that we met on Ndakinna (n-DAH-kee-NAH), homeland of the Abenaki peoples. By grace, may our discernment lead to greater peace and justice. Four hundred and two Friends gathered in person and one hundred and fifteen online via Zoom, with seventy-four youth and young adults. Among those attending on Zoom were five Friends from our beloved sister yearly meeting in Cuba.

We have gathered in a season of continued change. Our yearning to “return to normal” has been replaced by a recognition that we may not really want to, nor should we, go back. Ever-pressing new challenges call us forward in our lives while we still continue the process of grieving what has been lost. We are tender. And yet, all around us we see God appearing, and faithful Friends following the promptings of Spirit to help lead us forward.

Our speakers this year have brought us in intimate connection with the Spirit. Emma Condori Mamani of Santidad Friends Yearly Meeting of Bolivia delivered our Bible Half Hours, presenting Bible passages which she related to periods of her own life and how these gave her the courage to act for justice, often at great personal cost. Anna Fritz of North Pacific Yearly Meeting presented a musical plenary, sharing her ministry with speech, song, and cello—not a concert, but an invitation to spiritual deepening. On Sunday we were joined by Joseph and Jesse Bruchac of the Nulhegan Band of the Abenaki Nation, who shared stories and songs out of their tradition illustrating the importance of connection to the other living beings who share this world with us, and using the Abenaki language to invite us into new perspectives on the world.

Each of these presenters spoke plain and true. There was no intellectualizing, just direct story and song, given in deep humility. Again and again in our time together we were dropped down into our hearts, into our bodies, into a slower movement of time. Each of them got us to step back, breathe, and listen. They helped ground us and prepare us, and their presence and ministry readied us for the work we had before us. The truth is not complicated. We need to stop, breathe, listen with our hearts, and follow.

In worship we heard Friend after Friend testify to the simple power of God's unending love and acceptance, holding on to us even when we could not go on anymore. Fresh waters of baptism flowed from our eyes. We were returned continually to Spirit.

At Meeting for Business on Sunday evening we heard a prophetic word from a Friend, a naming of harm caused by the lack of a process for dealing with conflict at the yearly meeting level. We recognized the harm and pain, and a need for a clear and transparent path for transformation, healing, and reconciliation among us now and in the future at all levels. Truth was spoken. As a body, we stopped. We listened. We set aside our existing agenda, and turned it over to God for guidance. In that Light, a plan was formed to begin the process acknowledging that there may be uncertainty in the details, but that as a community we were in unity to do this hard work. We recognize Unity is not a state, not a success to be achieved, but a way of doing things or a practice. We recognize that pain makes us brittle. We recognize that we must be held to account where harm and pain have been done. We pray for grace from God and from each other that we may forgive and be forgiven.

We heard ministry rise up from young adult Friends who challenged us to greater generosity and inspired us to be hopeful about the financial future of our Yearly Meeting. They reminded us that they are the product of the Yearly Meeting, and that future generations depend on our support. We were glad to see more families and children returning to Sessions this year. We heard of the joy and love among our youth: silent circle times, caring for one another, raucous energy and noise, more stories with the Bruchacs, snacks, crafts, and play.

Friends listened to the call of Spirit to strive toward a loving, inclusive, and accessible community in many ways such as wearing masks, sharing audio recordings of advance documents, holding affinity spaces, offering pay-as-led registration, providing simultaneous interpretation, and continuing our practice of noticing patterns of oppression and faithfulness. Friends young and old shared intergenerational worship. Friends on the tech team showed loving attention to the inclusion of online attenders down to the smallest detail: explaining why people in the room were laughing; painstakingly focusing the camera on the writing on a drum. In Zoom gatherings for fellowship, some Friends online felt Spirit binding our community together through the joy, play, and serendipitous connection that are characteristic of the campus experience. We heard a Friend share their own ministry of building the beloved community in working to make our meetings more inclusive and accessible through technology. We name all of these efforts because we see in them faithful striving. We are still learning how to integrate online attenders more fully. Our work to undo patterns of harm and exclusion is far from done. Spirit calls us to continue to notice who feels safe and

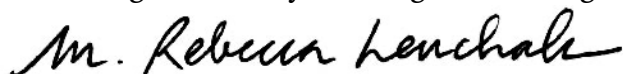
welcome and who does not, who is not here and why, and to challenge ourselves to keep building a world that is ever closer to God's beloved community.

We saw Friends faithfully working for change with deliberate persistence and patience. A representative to the recent Friends United Meeting triennial in Kenya testified and we listened with awe and wonder at the opening of hearts witnessed there. For the past year a working group has been diligently researching 19th-century New England Friends' involvement in the Indigenous Boarding School movement, an egregious example of white supremacy in action. Friends listened deeply and humbly to the working group's progress and offered support and encouragement. We are forced to acknowledge the multitude of logs in our own eyes. This is just one of the ways that we have participated in the genocide of the indigenous people of this continent, and in it there are lessons for us now about how our own discernment is shaped and warped by our culture. It is only one of our many sins for which we have not atoned, and our deep searching, and decolonizing, will take time and vigilance.

There are many paths we are called to that we have not yet managed to walk far along. In a summer of floods and fires, we know that climate catastrophe is at hand and that we are complicit. The sin of slavery, segregation, and white supremacy lingers on. Yet God's promise to Isaiah assures us: "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday ... [and] You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail." (Isaiah 58:9-11 NIV) At the close of our time together we arise with much work to do, and trust that following God's word in our hearts will lead us into the abundant life which can accomplish all things. May we be ready to say, "Here I am, Lord."

Yours In Faith and Love,

New England Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "M. Rebecca Leuchak".

Rebecca Leuchak, Presiding Clerk