

Canadian Yearly Meeting Epistle July 2023

Loving greetings to Friends everywhere:

From July 8-13, 2023, Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) met for our annual CYM-in-session as a beloved blended community. This was our first opportunity to meet in person since 2019. We gathered at Canadian Mennonite University, on Treaty 1 territory in Winnipeg. Meeting in person reminded us of the joys of in-person Worship and the blessings of fellowship and connection in sharing meals and spending time together. Including other Friends online provided access and connection for many.

In addition to those friends who met in person (86 registered, 17 of them children and teens), we were joined by 66 who had registered to participate online. We are grateful for the work of Program Committee whose members met the challenge of providing programming to meet the constraints and demands of both in person and online participation. The planning took hours and the reward was great: the programmers came up with some very creative solutions. For example, online worship sharing was scheduled during meal time in Winnipeg. This gathering will provide a wonderful opportunity to learn how we can gather as a community with less need for travel and more accessibility for those who are unable or prefer not to attend in person.

The gathering opened with a greeting from Vincent Solomon, a member of the Cree Nation originally from Norway House, who serves as priest at the Epiphany Indigenous Anglican Church in Winnipeg. Vince reminded us that treaties are agreements entered into by both indigenous people and settlers ...that we are all treaty people. He reminded us that “the trails of all of our ancestors have been well worn to this place,” and asked: “What is it that keeps us from reaching out to each other?”

The daily Quaker Studies lectures – “Living the Testimonies” or Quaker faith in action – were presented by J. Brent Bill from his home. He asked whether our words and actions do actually match what we say we believe. Friends were asked to reflect individually on which testimonies give us the most difficulty and what further witness should arise out of Quaker experience in the world we live in today.

Richard (Dick) Preston presented the Sunderland P Gardner Lecture, “Truth and Reconciliation: a personal view from 60 years of learning Cree culture”. Our blended meeting format allowed Dick to present from his home in Ancaster, Ontario. Dick shared with Friends the story of his long career in anthropology. He spoke of his friendship with the Cree people of Waskaganish, and many of the teachings they shared with him along the way. He told us that stories represent authentic culture, containing a wealth of thought, ethics for living, and spiritual integrity. Dick emphasized that the true basis for reconciliation is respect.

As it happened the themes of all three of our speakers – Vincent Solomon, Dick Preston and Brent Bill – brought us a common message: how can we be true to our Quaker truth and witness? These queries enriched our time spent in worship throughout the week. The struggle to rise above

human nature, to listen to the still, small voice within, to find unity in the guidance of the Spirit was manifest among us. We pray that our testimonies will help us to find a loving way forward in the future.

This year a special effort has been made to provide opportunities for all ages to meet in fellowship. New to the program were inter-generational community gatherings with songs and stories plus times set aside for inter-generational worship. Many activities engaged both youth and adults, for example, adults joined the children in a wet felting workshop where all splashed and soaped together. This brought fun and joy for the elders and helped the young ones feel more a part of the whole.

Our Meetings for Worship for Business involved both blessings and challenges. Due to unforeseeable circumstances, our presiding clerk was unable to serve. We were blessed by Friends willing to step in at the last moment. We were also blessed by Friends' technical expertise that allowed those attending virtually to participate.

How to adjust our meeting practices and gatherings to this new post-pandemic world with its challenges and opportunities was a recurrent theme. We struggle to adapt our business meeting practices to balance the commitment to reduced travel with ensuring that Monthly Meetings are able to participate and feel engaged. As we plan for our next blended gathering in 2024, we are confident that with patience and generosity a way will open.

During the week, Special Interest Groups (SIGs) were offered by individual Friends as well as by Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC) program committees, CYM Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel, CYM committees. Some SIGs were in person only, while some were blended. They included opportunities to build skills, learn about interests, and to engage in discernment. Topics included Friendly Bible study, nuclear energy, Quaker Earthcare Witness, the Alternatives to Violence Project, a game about coalition governments, peace in Ukraine and elsewhere, penal abolition, Quaker service work on indigenous right and relationships, lifting up Spirit while working on Quaker Concerns, and collecting oral histories. Canadian Friends Service Committee reviewed its mission, vision and mandate for Friends present and on line, highlighting areas of work, specific projects, and noted their new initiative which resulted in creating a staff position in Ottawa to join with other like-minded organizations to advance our concerns.

The Change and Sustainable Transformation Working Group (CAST) hosted a particularly well attended Spirit-led conversation about the relevance of Quakers in today's world, which led to moving contributions by Friends, both in person and online, about what the Religious Society of Friends, or in one case, Society of Friends, has come to mean for them, on personal and public levels. It was clear that, while there are thoughts related to improving the way we do things, being a Friend, being among Friends, and serving as Friends are significantly valuable to everyone who spoke. We were reminded that Monthly Meetings remain at the core of who we are, what we do and how we do it. It was also affirmed that Friends continue to add much needed value to the wider world.

A daily evening epilogue hosted by Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel provided an opportunity for worshipful reflection and gratitude. Then, for those who still had the energy, there was music and song!

As we meet together we celebrate the blessings of being able to gather together in person. We have been challenged and inspired by the blended meeting. How we will continue to hold our annual gatherings given the challenges posed by time, cost, and environmental impact will be a question in the forefront in our discernment over the coming months. Learning how to be a gathered people with our new ways will be an ongoing process.

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