

Epistle from Wilmington Yearly Meeting of Friends, 7th Month, 30th Day 2017:

This is the single question facing Wilmington Yearly Meeting this weekend: What is the presence in our midst saying to you, in this moment? I invite you to hold that question in prayerful silence for a moment, and then continue to hold it through the discussions this afternoon and the business sessions tomorrow.

-Kelly Kellum, Clerking Workshop

To all Friends Everywhere,

On January 15th, 2017, Fairview Friends Meeting adopted a minute entitled "Same-Sex Marriage Wilmington Yearly Meeting Position," and sent it to the Yearly Meeting for consideration. At Mini Yearly Meeting sessions in March, held in Tennessee, the Fairview Minute was presented to the Permanent Board. Based on this Minute, our Presiding Clerk, David Goff, set us the challenge of discussing at our annual summer sessions whether or not we could allow individual meetings to discern on their own which marriages to take under their care.

Around that central business, other issues were discussed and other stories were told. In our pre-Yearly Meeting Retreat, Megan Fair spoke about the work of FCNL's Advocacy Teams. In our business sessions, we heard from Jim Reynolds about painful budget decisions at Wilmington College that included cutting the position of Ruth Brindle, Quaker Heritage Center Curator. We had an excellent clerking workshop, led by Kelly Kellum of North Carolina Yearly Meeting. We enjoyed musical ministry offered by Patti Kent of Living Word Friends Church, and heard an update from Ms Candi Young about exciting new plans for the Belize Friends School. At our annual peace lecture, we heard from Migwe Kimemia about his work in Dayton with the American Friends Service Committee.

The emotional weight of this year's session, though, lay in our joint discernment around Fairview's Minute. We found, laboring together on this question, that we could not come to unity.

Some of those who spoke to the question shone the light of Truth on the deep differences that divide us. We disagree about the nature of the authority of Scripture. We disagree about how to balance the witness of Scripture with the witness of the inward experience of God. We disagree about the authority of the Yearly Meeting over Monthly Meetings. We disagree about the continuing nature of revelation.

While acknowledging these disagreements, we affirmed our love for the fellowship. We heard friends share their deep love and appreciation for one another, the relationships that have formed over the years, and the unique place Wilmington occupies as a "middle of the road" Yearly Meeting. Is it, in fact, part of our witness that we continue to meet together despite our differences?

Yet there were some who felt that these disagreements hamper our trust in joint efforts like our camping program. Others thought that our ability to work together in efforts like Friends Disaster Service indicated that our trust can grow through common work. We asked some troubling questions: If we are not in unity and do not see way forward, will continuing in organizational fellowship become more harmful to us than helpful? Can we trust one another in joint work when we cannot agree on what to teach our children?

One Friend expressed frustration with the design of the discussion, noting that it seems like, once again, we're just kicking the can further down the road. Many felt that the discussion time was not long enough and that Friends needed more time together.

At the end of our business session, we approved, with standing ovations, Minutes of appreciation for the work of Ruth Brindle and Doug Haag, who is concluding his service as our Executive Secretary. As divided as we may be on theological questions, we are united in our support and gratitude for one another.

One Friend asked if Cuba Friends Meetinghouse could be opened early on Sunday morning so that Friends could gather and pray for our Yearly Meeting, to general approval. In closing, Clerk David Goff named our pain and confusion in his prayer: "Our hearts hurt. We love each other, but this disagreement still divides us. We don't want to separate but we don't see our way clear to go forward together."

We continue to walk in the Light that we have, and pray that more will be given. We pray also that this epistle finds you in good faith, filled with the living Christ and willing to go where He leads and do what he asks of you.

On behalf of Wilmington Yearly Meeting,

The Epistle Committee

Jonathan Goff, Dan Kasztelan, Julie Rudd