

Exercises

Illinois Yearly Meeting Annual Sessions, 2013

At opening sessions the clerk proposed the question of laying down the committee that writes the exercises report. During the discussion of the question it became clear that there was an interest in the continuance of the exercises report, but doing it in a different way. Through reviewing exercises reports from various years, especially from the early 1900's, in addition to reviewing the committee's charge and reflecting upon the discussion about the exercises report, this year's committee came to a conclusion to do something new or, more correctly, renewed. This year, as an experimental practice, the committee is seeking to record how the Spirit moved the yearly meeting and spoke to the yearly meeting during our time together at annual sessions. This report reflects only a selection of the corporate and individual spiritual experiences of those who have gathered for annual sessions. The hope for recording such experiences is not to encapsulate them as a documentation of the past, but as a source of continuance for further, deeper, wider, more extended reflection of that which we experience at annual sessions. What we recall are not the exact words but the spirit in which these words were spoken.

We gathered under the theme of joy and had many occasions to reflected upon, explore, and seek deeper understandings on joy. Various Friends spoke in worship, workshops, and presentations on joy. One Friend spoke that while we are not always able to be joyful, sharing and listening are helpful ways to access joy. A Friend asked that when we talk of joy, how aware are we of where God is in the story, and how does that awareness of God in our joy change our story? Other messages about joy included the call to opening ourselves up to both acute joy and chronic joy, and to locate our joy in simpleness.

During meeting for worship a Friend expressed his joy at being in attendance at annual sessions since he sees his spiritual roots in this location. Another Friend broke the chirping ministry of the birds gathered in the trees surrounding the meetinghouse to express that as the birds cannot help singing, so too we cannot help sharing our resources with each other. This Friend posed a question about how we share our yearly meeting land and resources. A Friend noted in a presentation on the finances, that while it is good from a financial perspective that the yearly meeting committees do not spend much money, it may be an indication of low spiritual inspiration and energy. The use and development of the yearly meeting campus were carefully presented and patiently processed in various committee reports and workshops. The gift of the yearly meeting land and facilities that has been entrusted to us as a yearly meeting by Friends, current and past, is the gift of sharing its joy and the joy that it brings.

Our gathering at annual sessions is an expression and practice of community in many practical and spiritual aspects of the term. As the spoken ministry of a Friend reminded us, all of our work, practical and otherwise, has a spiritual grounding. Our business meetings can be an exercise in trying and testing the bonds of our community and our process of seeking guidance as a gathered community. The care, attentiveness, and patience exhibited, though at times imperfect, during business meeting to the business at hand, to each other, and to the clerks exhibits our commitment to “hang in there” during the rough spots of seeking unity on issues where there is no clear, quick, easy path. Thankfully, we were reminded in a time of worship, during business meeting, that the strength of our business is founded on our depth of worship. Another Friend spoke of attentively listening to concerns since below the stated concerns might be deeper concerns—everything is not always on the surface. We also came to be reminded, through engaging in our business process, that we all carry biases that we may neither understand nor realize. It is through loving care and trust that we may be able to identify those biases in ourselves and each other, a process of clarity that will strengthen our sense of community—a spiritual community of friends of the Light.

One important aspect of community is the connection we have with each other as individuals, as monthly meetings, and as a yearly meeting. This connection is displayed in our sharing with each other and ministry to each other. A Friend posed a challenging question, “Whom do we gather to serve?” Random acts of ministry frequently occur on the front porch—pastoral care, eldering, sharing of joys, discussions of meeting development, to name a few. This rampant action of ministry has infected our youth, with the middle school engaging in the ministry of serving ice cream on a muggy summer day, another unexpected joy that seemed to just pop up. The intergenerational variety show exemplified our energy, sharing, and creativity. The reading of memorial minutes reminded us not only of the ministry and actions of those dear Friends who have died in this past year, but also reminded us of the stream of Quaker life as during the reading we heard the children playing and singing outside. Like the birds, they cannot help but express their joy. From such simple expressions of joy we have much to learn.

Exercises Committee

Wil Brant
Nancy Finke
Noel Pavlovic