

To All Friends Everywhere:

Earlier this year, every Monthly Meeting received the Wilmington Yearly Meeting State of Society queries, based on the Yearly Meeting theme of compassion through action. There were three queries:

1. How has God's compassion been present in your life, and in the life of your Meeting?
2. In what ways is your Meeting feeling called to put compassion into action, both within the Meeting, and in your community?
3. Recognizing the Light in others is an act of compassion. How do you give voice to that compassion—both in your Meeting and in your own life?

Throughout these sessions, we found ourselves considering the second query over and over, applied at the Yearly Meeting level: “In what ways is the Yearly Meeting called to put compassion into action, both within the Meeting, and in our community?”

We found this query to be especially relevant in the discussions we held on how Wilmington Yearly Meeting relates to Wilmington College—how we serve and are served by that relationship. As we considered a request to approve new Articles of Incorporation setting forth a new relationship between the College and the Yearly Meeting, we realized the questions we needed to answer were deeper than the wording of a legal document. What are the most compassionate actions we could take for the College, and for the Yearly Meeting? Unable to come to a resolution of these questions, we have committed over the next three months to a process for further consideration of our relationship to the College. We are especially committed to discernment about whether this is a ministry to which Wilmington Yearly Meeting is still called, and, if we are, in what ways.

An underlying concern for compassionate action was also expressed in our discussion and decision on the fate of our three Quarterly Meetings. We eventually came to a sense that the Quarterly Meeting, when it has been valuable to Friends for fellowship and spiritual formation, may continue. In other places, we are able to release Friends from an obligation which carries no spiritual uplift or encouragement. We have left it to each Quarter to decide whether they want to continue to meet to carry out the business traditionally assumed by Quarterly Meetings; or whether they want to suspend activities, and use new pathways that allow the Yearly Meeting to fulfill the functions that have belonged to Quarterly Meetings.

We discovered the same deeper concern for compassion in action in the proposal that the Yearly Meeting gather four times a year: Will these meetings be meaningful times of worship, fellowship, and encouragement? We approved the proposal hopefully, amid much discussion about how to make sure these gatherings serve our souls and our spiritual life.

Our long discussions on proposed new procedures and processes is, at a deeper level, a consideration of this year’s third query: “Recognizing the Light in others is an act of compassion. How do you give voice to that compassion—both in your Meeting and in your own life?” The question of how we recognize and encourage the Light in others is intrinsically connected with

the questions raised by new processes: what are the purpose and mission of our Yearly Meeting? Is it to fulfill all the functions ceded to us by history and our forebears? Is it to discover new missions and functions? Little by little, through our consideration of all our business, and not necessarily by approval of specific Task Force recommendations, we are moving toward centering our concerns around our present world, and not obligations to the past. How will we use our energy? How will we conserve our energy? How will we make sure that we spend our time together on ministry work and spiritual discernment rather than on set forms and obligations? How will we call forth ministry from our gifts, rather than our numbers? Not necessarily intentionally, but inevitably, these questions became part of all our discussions.

Joyfully, we discovered we were able to change our framing as we discussed a proposal to hire a Yearly Meeting Youth Minister. Rather than considering the proposal as a wonderful idea that “we don’t have the resources to do,” we discovered that it is possible to look at the question while mindful of the resources we already have. In fact, we found it logistically difficult to even approve authorizing the Board on Youth and Young Adults to hire a youth minister—not out of a sense of fear, but because Friends were so quickly offering potential resources and funding avenues.

In our USFW lecture, FUM Belize Director Nikki Holland taught us that when the New Testament speaks of “salvation,” the Greek word being translated is often *sozo*—which means “to rescue,” but also, “to heal.” When we say that Christ is our Savior, we are claiming Christ as our Healer. When we pray for healing within and among Friends, we are praying for that which will bring them salvation in the here-and-now. Healing is the power of Christ’s compassion in action.

We experienced the healing power of Christ in two very specific ways this year. As we began and ended our business, we offered heartfelt prayers for the healing and encouragement of some of our members, specifically. And we ended our Ministry and Counsel session with a time of worship-sharing on our Covid experiences, individually and as Meetings, and our Covid griefs of being separated from people important to us. There are some among us for whom “compassion through action” is a call to do, and to move forward now. There are some others for whom “compassion through action” is a call to yet sit in the ashes of grief, letting our presence—to others and to ourselves—be our action. Throughout our sessions, we noticed the tiredness and disconnection that has come to us alongside this pandemic. We experienced collective despair as we realized that restrictions on church and group gatherings may be reinstated in the near future. We long to sit down with each other in body as well as spirit, and pray that it will become possible.

Our first State of Society query, referencing our Yearly Meeting theme, Matthew 25:35–40, noted that a compassionate God is revealed to us in these verses. We were asked to consider how God’s compassion has been present in the personal lives of Friends and in the lives of our meetings. What we found in our annual sessions, in business and worship-sharing and fellowship alike, is the depth to which we are held in God’s healing compassion. We were able to pray fervently for healing, to consider potentially healthier ways forward, and—even through our own confusion—to envision a future of wholeness and life, in which we are clearly able to match compassion and action.

We pray for that same blessing for you, Friends: that you will be seeking and finding healing, and faithfully living Christ's call to compassion. We pray especially for you in this time of Covid-19, that you are well and that your Meetings and ministries are prospering in the Light.

In Christ's Compassionate Love,

Wilmington Yearly Meeting

(Epistle Committee: Jonathan Goff, Dan Kasztelan, Julie Rudd)