

## **Exercises**

### **Illinois Yearly Meeting 2015**

Those of us who travel from urban areas to come to our yearly meetinghouse find ourselves outside our comfort zones as we trade air-conditioned spaces for a humid meetinghouse, comfortable beds for soggy tents and air mattresses, and concrete sidewalks for muddy paths. Friends from rural areas trade their quiet streets for crowds in the lunchroom, lines for the bathroom, and groups of chattering Friends on the road through campus. It is in coming together through discomfort that we find ourselves reaching new depths.

Nature has always been a force for us to contend with and be in awe of; but site preparation 2015 will go down in history as the year of the mosquito and the mud. By the start of our Annual Sessions on Wednesday the Stewards had sprayed the trees with insecticide to reduce the numbers of mosquitoes, and laid gravel in the parking area to make driveways passable. As a friend informed us during meeting for business Friday, although the mosquitoes irritate us, they are an important food source for many other creatures. The water that turns our driveways into impassable mud also creates the wetland home for the frogs that sing us to sleep at night. On “Frog Walks” on Friday and Saturday night we heard the American Toad, the Chorus Frog, the Grey Tree Frog, and the rare Cricket Frog.

Our theme this year, “From Mystic Voice to Active Voice” encouraged us to move from the comfort of contemplative worship into the potentially uncomfortable but important prophetic engagement with the world. As our opening speaker on Wednesday evening, Marcelle Martin, phrased it:

The mystic says: Know God and your life will change.

The activist/prophet says: Change your life and you will know God.

Throughout the week workshops on mandala making, chanting, and writing encouraged us to engage creatively and artistically with our spiritual energies.

The racial violence of the past year has had an impact on Friends. As we grapple with finding our Quaker voice and moving into action around this particular issue, we discover that we are each on a different part of our journey, and that unity on how to proceed can be hard to find. We unite easily behind a letter from FGC in response to “the loss at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston of faithful leaders and servants of God’s love.” But are our meetings free of racism? Are we able to make our meetings places that are inviting to all people, regardless of their ethnic or racial identity? Friends are still struggling with these issues, as was made clear in a three-day workshop, “Developing a Quaker Voice for Racial Equity,” led by Vanessa Julye and Marijke van Roojen. Vanessa has worked with the yearly meeting for several years to transform Quaker testimonies into active voices.

The Faith and Practice Committee brought forward several sections for us to consider. While reviewing “Recognizing Spiritual Gifts and Leadings” we stumbled over how to best help our monthly meetings as they endorse Friends who work in paid ministry outside our meetings. We are grateful to have such skilled and gifted Friends among us, and we need to carefully ensure that our practices will allow them to utilize their gifts in the wider world.

We were enriched by many Friends who traveled to join us and share their stories with us. Alice & Staughton Lynd, who have inspired so many Friends, shared their experiences with us on Saturday. As Staughton advised us at the end of his talk, “Approaching activism in this spirit of moderate mysticism, many ways will open.”

The meeting continues to face many challenges, from envisioning a stable financial situation to living our faith in the world. We are engaged in the process of meeting each other where we are and moving forward together. As the rain and insects gave way to perfectly clear skies at the end of Annual Sessions, we believe living through the storm will allow us to emerge changed and prepared for the road ahead.

Respectfully submitted by Johnny Gillespie, Adrian Nelson, and Marie White