

SAYMA.URJ Clerk's Report: Spring Representative Meeting
RM 152 4.6.2024

The SAYMA Spring Representative Meeting was contentious. Much like the Fall Representative Meeting, the conflict centered on whether Sharon "Star" Smith, a Black and Indigenous Friend of color should represent SAYMA at the FWCC World gathering in South Africa. One difference between the Fall Rep Meeting and this one is, a group of SAYMA Friends of color decided to nominate Star as their representative to FWCC. Why? Because they had asked Adrian Mehr, the official SAYMA FWCC representative to meet with them, and he literally ignored their invitation. He did not even acknowledge receiving the invitation, let alone decline it. This group of SAYMA FOC was not pleased about being ignored, so they decided to nominate someone they felt would faithfully represent their interests and concerns regarding SAYMA's racism at the world gathering.

They sent a letter nominating Sharon "Star" Smith to the Nominating Committee clerk, so that her name could be added to the slate of nominees for approval at the Spring Representative Meeting. Yet Star was still not included on the committee's slate of nominees. Why? Because the SAYMA Nominating Committee, was unable to find unity on the issue. As a result, SAYMA FOC chose to bring their nomination to the floor of the Representative Meeting, and several Friends of color from the group attended the meeting in support of the representative they chose. However, even after SAYMA FOC brought their own nominee forward for an already open FWCC representative position, they were faced with yet another textbook example of how systemic racism operates among Friends.

It all began with the following paragraph from the Nominating Committee Report.

"We have had several meetings centered on bringing Star Smith forward as one of our three representatives to FWCC. We received a letter from the recently formed Friends of Color conflict transformation group asking us to do just that. In our committee work we encountered some of the conflict that SAYMA as a body is experiencing. **We could not reach unity.** Some of us are hopeful that we have built enough trust together that we can truly transform this conflict by listening to each other, learning from each other, and above all, listening to Spirit and remaining open to that transformation."

In brief, a couple of white Friends on the Nominating Committee—one of whom is Adrian Mehr, the same designated FWCC representative who ignored the invitation to meet with SAYMA Friends of color--refused to accept a nomination from SAYMA Friends of color. This prompted the FOC group to bring their nomination forward from the floor, partly because they did not appreciate having their nomination sidelined by the nomination committee, and also because they wanted to see who would

dare to show up to speak against a nomination already approved by SAYMA Friends of color.

Question: How is the Nominating Committee's lack of unity even relevant, when the body of SAYMA ultimately decides approval or disapproval of nominees during Meeting for Business?

We asked a member of Nominating this very question, when they asked to meet with the SAYMA FOC anti-racism focus group--because Nominating is having a hard time finding people to serve on SAYMA committees. She told us the reason they try to find unity regarding any given nominee, is to minimize controversy. Except, it is just NOT possible to uproot racism without controversy. This policy has led to classic gatekeeping for white supremacy, which amounts to racial wounding for Friends of color. So, clearly, the SAYMA Nominating Committee does not understand this very basic principle of anti-racist praxis.

At the representative Meeting, most of the day was taken up with commentary for and against Star Smith, to the point where not much other business could be discussed. Basically, said nominee was not approved due to opposition from just four (4) white men--one of whom is an active member of the SAYMA Nominating Committee. Their names are: Jackson Napier, (Berea KY), Steve Olshewsky (Berea KY), Morgan Murry (Asheville NC, member of Nominating Committee) and Aaron Rucsetta (Atlanta GA). It should be noted that all four of these white men chose not to participate in the yearly meeting's racial conflict transformation program, therefore had no training in systemic racial analysis, and most likely were completely unaware that their actions were in fact, racist.

What reasons did they articulate?

Friends raised a number of process questions and concerns, which almost never happens when Young Adult Friends (YAF's) or Junior Yearly Meeting (JYM) want anything; at least I have never seen it. For example, a concern was raised about the FOC nomination not being on the agenda. The question was, is it proper to bring an item of business forward from the floor, as a last minute addition to the agenda. Morgan Murry (Asheville NC) said he felt **ambushed** because the FOC nomination was not on the agenda in advance. And, someone, I don't remember who, had the audacity to ask if the clerks were attempting to bypass the nominating process. Anyone who has attended Quaker Meetings for Business regularly, already knows that it is absolutely appropriate for nominations to come from the floor, especially when the Nominating Committee is having difficulty finding nominees to fill positions, which is the case in this instance.

Next, they discussed whether Star--not the FOC group--was asking to be a delegate or a representative, to FWCC. As nobody from FWCC was present to speak on behalf of FWCC, it took a while to find someone who could explain why this tactic was a bull shit, stalling tactic. Then there were questions about whether SAYMA FOC were asking that Adrian Mehr be replaced (Replacement Theory), even though the nomination letter from

FOC never asked for that. Remember, there was already an open FWCC representative position that the nominating committee was looking for someone to fill. It is not an exaggeration to say these discussions took up most of the day. And, I am not the only one who felt we had been filibustered, enabling a few white men to call in reinforcements.

Then, when Star's nomination was finally tested, Steve Olshewski shouted, "NO, NO, NO! Many Friends have said, Star does not represent POC or SAYMA." This white man actually shouted over the voices of Friends of color who showed up to support the nominee of their choice, while daring to speak for some imaginary FOC who were not even present. What kind of Friendship is that?

Then, for some reason I may never understand, racist white Friends can always find some poor colonized soul to support their racist agenda, and this time Tom Kunesh, an Indigenous Lakota Friend (Nashville TN) was the one. He actually said, "I support Star representing African concerns but I do have concerns about Star representing Indigenous Americans. Star does not speak for Natives." (This is verbatim, from my notes) And, of course, Star identifies as both Black and Native, specifically, Saponi and Powhatan/Pamunkey from Virginia, and Houdenonsaunee/kanien'kehà:ka (Mohawk), from New York. I cannot imagine what Tom was thinking when he said what he said, because his act of lateral violence against another Friend of color, a Black and Indigenous woman and elder, absolutely calls Tom's leadership on the FGC Institutional Assessment Implementation Committee, as well as his decolonizing ministry among Friends into question.

Needless to say, the nominee SAYMA Friends of color brought forward was not approved. I have lost track of the number of battles with racism SAYMA has had in Meetings for Business, because this nonsense has been happening for at least the last six years; far too long without acknowledgement or resolution. So much of what has been happening in these business meetings would be unbelievable if we had not witnessed it with our own eyes, and documented it. However, SAYMA Friends of color have not given up. We have already decided to bring the same nominee forward at SAYMA Yearly Meeting Sessions, in June.

Observations, Analysis, Issues and Problems to Consider, IF Friends are Committed to becoming an anti-racist faith community:

Melissa called it: She said "A few white men enacted every item on Tema Okun's White Supremacy Culture Traits list, and when none of them worked as they planned, they broke down into screaming fits, making themselves victims of their own obstruction tactics." So, orderly and worshipful discernment was interrupted and successfully derailed by a few white people to the point where most of the allotted time for the yearly meeting's business was taken up with, what one Friend called an "organized filibuster". It should be noted that No Friend of color who attended this meeting, either virtually or in person, ever engaged in the same type of disruptive maneuvers during this Meeting--except for Tom Kunesh, who introduced himself as "Mixed-Blood/white and Lakota."

From an anti-racist decolonized perspective, identifying oneself by the colonizer's metrics, is the act of a colonized mind. IJS

Issue: Friends calling out without waiting to be recognized by the clerks.

Issue: Friends speaking for others, not using I statements.

Issue: White Friends speaking over FOC in the room while audaciously claiming to speak on behalf of Friends of color who were not present.

Issue: White Friends called out to the individual Friend of color nominee directly, instead of speaking to the clerks. They carried out personal attacks, insults, provocations, and racial wounding during a SAYMA Meeting for business while posing as victims.

The co-clerks really did everything they could to hold the space in worshipful and proper order. Knowing this meeting was likely to be contentious, they carefully chose inspirational readings about Quaker fundamentals like, direct/unmediated experience of the divine, radical equality, continuing revelation, and other readings. (See the official minutes at www.sayma.org, for the list of references.) They took regular breaks, calling everyone to silent worship, and then shared an inspirational passage, meant to remind us all of what we say we believe in, our Quaker values. Yet it was clear, from the beginning, that a few angry white people, attended the meeting just to advance their own racist agenda to stand in the way of self-determination for SAYMA Friends of color.

It was a very long weekend, between the necessary advance preparation before the Spring Representative Meeting and the debriefing sessions with traumatized/wounded Friends, afterward. Much was said and revealed, during this time. Some Friends were shocked at the behavior of this small group of white men in our midst. For the Friends of color who attended the meeting, specifically to support the nominee they had approved in advance, the level of vitriol they witnessed was alarming, though not surprising, because we have all seen and/or experienced this behavior before, and know it very well. Many thanks go to our anti-racist white Friends who have been trained in basic systemic racism analysis, some of whom have studied on their own for years. They were therefore able to see and name the racial power dynamics operating in our Quaker Process. Many also spoke eloquently in support of the nominee SAYMA FOC had chosen.

And, there is still NO Quaker Process, policy or strategy for holding our racist disruptors accountable, yet.

We must to DO better.

In the Light of racial justice,

Star Smith,
Clerk of SAYMA Uplifting Racial Justice (URJ)