

Clerk's Letter to SAYMA Body, June 2021

I envision SAYMA's yearly sessions as an occasion for renewal of the spirit. It is a gathering of monthly meetings of all sizes, and provides a place for isolated Friends and small worship groups to have a larger Friends community, a place to experience spirit-based hospitality.

My first SAYMA yearly gathering was at Warren Wilson in 1971, the second annual sessions. We were not yet a yearly meeting, but an association for fellowship in the manner of liberal Friends. This was a group of Appalachian folk of European descent, where the greatest diversity I experienced was through a young Baptist woman in our worship group who washed our feet. What a blessing! In the years since, our diversity has increased somewhat, and four years ago we accepted the challenge to make our meetings more welcoming to Friends of Color. We need to renew the graciousness of spirit and place of deep retreat of those early years, without retreating into 1970's naivete about unraveling racism.

Since last summer, my clerk's letter has emphasized our spiritual focus as a religious body. The ongoing example is the distinction between critical race theory and its powerful sociological analysis of our disordered white supremacist society, and the practice of Friends, a tradition established by a group of white lower-middle class Englishfolk, not unlike our rural Appalachian context, who set out to emulate the behavior of the early Church, based on loving one another while befriending truth. This has always included challenging one another as well, but in a spirit of patience, forbearance, and deep listening. As Friends, we do not sit in judgment of each other, but wait for the Spirit to move in each of our hearts before acting as a body.

Unfortunately, as we approach SAYMA yearly sessions, there are those among us who would enforce their deeply held convictions through pressuring, judging, and threatening behavior. One plenary speaker and two workshops have been challenged and threatened with disruption. One of those workshops has been cancelled, and the leader of the second feels genuinely threatened by escalating attacks, asking for protection. As an open religious society, our protection comes from the divine, which resides deep within each of us, acting from within the body, not from a hierarchy of leaders. But if we do not trust one another, invoking deep listening in a spirit of worship when we experience differences, then we are profoundly vulnerable.

So we meet in a place of vulnerability, some in fear, others in a place of anger and judgment, sorely needing to listen to each other and build trust in our fundamental tenet as Friends, that *there is that of God in each of us*. Whatever transpires in our time together over the next week, let us accept that vulnerability as a place of instruction, while vowing to hold each other in loving safety as we continue to work out our differences.

Robert McGahey

SAYMA Presiding Clerk

50<sup>th</sup> Annual Sessions, June 2021