Peace and Social Justice Committee, 2019 Annual Report
Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, Homewood

Membership: Our membership varied during the year. Our membership today (March 31, 2020) consists of Barbara Bezdek, Kathryn Munnell, Louise Hopkins, Jody Hopkins, Peter Phalen, and (recently named but not yet formally approved) Jean Athey. Rosetta Graham is also a member but is rarely able to attend because her health often does not allow her to attend. (She is 96.) We have put in place a plan to have the office send her agendas and minutes. During all or part of 2019, additional members were Jo Brown, Samantha Hack, Phil Furnas, and Debbie Cooper. (The latter participated faithfully although she was never formally nominated to the committee.) She has since moved from the area. Sarah Bur has been detailed to the committee by Ministry and Council and has attended faithfully since September. At the start of 2019 our clerk was Barbara Bezdek, and in July Jo Brown succeeded as clerk and served as such through the rest of 2019. (In February 2020 Jo needed to withdraw from the committee and we have currently decided to clerk collaboratively.) Louise Hopkins serves as the committee’s contact person.

1. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MAIN WAYS YOU SPENT YOUR TIME DURING THE PAST (CALENDAR) YEAR?
   - We sponsored a weekly vigil, outside the building, nearly every Friday. Attendance has varied but despite our occasional small numbers, the response has been encouraging. For the last few years -- since the death of Freddie Gray and the uprising in Baltimore -- our message has been “Black Lives Matter”, which we have augmented with additional signs to relate to concern for the violence taking Black lives in Baltimore, including CeaseFire Baltimore, No Hate, Love thy Neighbor (No Exceptions) and so forth.
   - This year too we provided strong support for Baltimore CeaseFire. This included providing the organization with office space in our building, for nominal rent that is then donated back to them. (Recommended by the committee. Approved by the Meeting) We joined in CeaseFire weekends with our vigils, and in November, with an art show of Jo Brown’s work, co-sponsored by the Homewood Arts Working Group.
   - In February, The Peace Committee initiated a meeting with Jacob Flowers, AFSC regional director, with Friend of a Friend project staff, and Baltimore Quakers, to discuss ways AFSC could stay active in Baltimore despite its plans to lay down its program in Baltimore.
   - In April we participated in the Baltimore Yearly Meeting Peace Networking Day at Sidwell Friends School.
   - In May our committee joined together with the Peace and Social Justice Committee of Stony Run for a retreat. The retreat enabled individual members to identify their passions for peace work, and then we discussed what we might do as a Quaker committee. The idea that has continued to percolate is to explore some kind of peace school. Since that retreat we have discussed what such a project might be, and what peace skill-building and conflict resolution/transformation we must work to learn as Quakers, in order to ally with and contribute to the efforts of many around the City.
   - We co-sponsored or hosted programs brought to the area by peace-aligned organizations. These included film and presentation of Born in Gaza, and speakers from Combatants for Peace.
   - We hosted Friends from the Northampton, Massachusetts Friends Meeting who are traveling under a concern about the International Nuclear Weapons Ban, and who led a workshop at Homewood in June for regional anti-nuclear activists.
   - We continue to advise the Meeting on allocating funds to peace and social justice concerns near and far. This year we extended our ‘due diligence’ to see how Friends’ support was being used. We considered the relative merits of larger gifts, and the usefulness of small contributions. We determined it is useful to make both large and small contributions, and affirmed our recent practice to distribute 60% to local organizations, 40% to national organizations including the Quaker organizations.

2. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE SPIRITUAL STATE OF YOUR COMMITTEE?
   - Our committee has struggled to have clear communication and united focus, or at least, to turn focus into action together. This is at times painful and demoralizing, even though we have confidence in the conviction and loving intention of the committee members. As in our joint meetings with Stony Run, we
confront the issue of what it means to be a Peace Committee, of a Quaker Meeting, rather than a collection of peace-concerned individuals.

Our understanding remains partial. Historically, the committee has contained members with disparate personal commitments to issues about which there was great passion, but not always consensus. These issues continued during the last year. There were times when the committee felt dysfunctional to some members. The committee's capacity to function in good order and to engage members' energies improved when Ministry and Counsel provided support during committee meetings. At this point we are small, but have increased optimism and a belief that if we can continue to work together we can indeed serve that of God in each person and let our lives speak.

3. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR CHALLENGES YOU HAVE FACED/MAJOR STRENGTHS THAT HELPED YOU?
- Our major challenge has been finding consensus regarding our collective purpose, and activating that purpose, as a committee of the Meeting. Despite this, we have members who have brought energy and optimism, and a willingness to keep slogging through until such time as we can find unity. Nonetheless, our condition has resulted in the committee accomplishing less than we would have wished.
- However, we are not without strengths. Our committee members are passionate about engaging in peace and social justice efforts and are well-connected to activist work in the city of Baltimore. We are resourceful and determined. Another strength, that has made a real difference, is the support we have received from Ministry and Council.

4. WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE?
- As a committee, we hope to heal from our history of painful conflict. We hope to bring together our energies to become a group that is inspired and passionate to do peace-building in Baltimore. This longing is what galvanizes us.
- Building on earlier work against unjust bail and mass incarceration, we built consensus that we want to witness against non-violent offenders being held in jails and prisons, where now they are vulnerable to contracting the COVID 19 virus. Just this week, the committee submitted a letter to the editor on this subject, published in The Baltimore Sun. As we prepare this report, another major challenge is the challenge that is facing the world; how do we function, and indeed help, with the COVID 19 pandemic. We have had to set aside the vigil which has operated continuously for many years. We are needing to meet virtually. We cannot go forward with our plans for a large event to serve as a kick-off for some sort of peace school.