

REPORT FROM SAYMA'S REPRESENTATIVES TO THE AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

SAYMA's representatives to the American Friends Service Committee are members of AFSC's Corporation, the representative governing body of AFSC. We gathered at Friends Center in Philadelphia for the annual Corporation meeting of the American Friends Service Committee Corporation. The theme of the meeting was "Change the Story, Change the World: Telling the truth about Militarism in US communities and around the world." This was the last meeting prior to the 100th anniversary of AFSC in 2017. During business sessions we did the basic work of the Corporation including approving nominations to the Board of AFSC and for members-at-large to the Corporation.

In the General Secretary's report, Shan Cretin spoke to us about the two "overarching strategies" of the AFSC. One is a focus on transformative youth leadership in a process that starts with youth services, moves into youth development and youth leadership and ends up with civic engagement and youth organizing. She told us the story of Elmo in Seattle who went from starting a small gardening project to organizing that led to fundamental changes in school disciplinary processes.

The other strategy for AFSC is based on the need to change narratives -- especially around war and militarism. In many ways the public now glorify war and the military. In the past AFSC has focused on efforts to ameliorate the effects of war through hunger relief and rebuilding efforts. The focus is shifting to changing the narratives around war to prevent future wars. The story she told here was about AFSC's work in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) which has focused on programs to raise farm productivity. North Korea does not have adequate food security. AFSC's program builds trust and good will, and demonstrates that productive engagement is possible.

In addition to the business sessions, there were a variety of plenaries, worship (both programmed and unprogrammed) and workshops. Our first formal session began with "Quaker hip hop" by Sterling Duns; the entire assembly joined at the end, singing "I believe in you." The Reverend Dr. William Barber II delivered an inspiring presentation describing the work of "Moral Mondays" in bringing morality to bear on immoral policies. The second evening program was "When I See Them, I See Us: Policing in a Community under Occupation, How We Resist across Movements and Promote Alternatives." This program featured a panel with Ahmad Abuznaid of Dream Defenders, Joshua Saleem from AFSC's St. Louis office and Tabitha Mustafa with AFSC's New Orleans office. They made the connection between Black oppression here and Palestinian oppression in the Middle East and the solidarity and opportunities those connections can bring. Friends received the testimony of program participants and guests with nonjudgmental empathy.

Workshop sessions focused on a variety of AFSC programs. Staff from regional and international programs showcased a variety of projects. From Palestine, Yazan Meqbil and Brad Parker created a documentary on the problem of Palestinian children being arrested and taken, often in the dead of night, and subjected to brutal interrogations and imprisonment. They discussed the psychological trauma these children suffer and invited participants to send videos to the children and their families. Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) staff is asking Quaker testimony inspired questions, as the opportunities arise, to engage diplomats in relationships that may influence state policies. QUNO and AFSC staffs are also working hard to give voice to civil society organizations in conflict states, like Burundi, and have successfully impacted Chinese think-tanks and university researchers who have proved eager to study international peace building strategies. Guided by Quaker principles and in collaboration with like-minded partners, AFSC is demonstrating it is doing real "Spiritual Witness" work at multiple levels of engagement. Jerry Elster & Dustin Washington discussed transformative justice as an alternative to retributive justice and mass incarceration.

How is AFSC looking to us as SAYMA Friends? There were three of us at this year's meeting and we have three different perspectives. One of us was impressed with the Friendly manner in which business was conducted both at the Corporation meeting and the following Board meeting (which we were invited to observe.) The depth and engagement offered by AFSC programs seems truly impressive and appears to be a strong outreach of Quaker concerns and values. Another has a concern that, when hosting non Friends witnessing to the injustice they have suffered or documented, we do not offer a sufficient witness to the possibility of confronting injustice without rancor. The staff of AFSC seems at times to buy into anger and defiance over forgiveness and reconciliation. Our third perspective is that AFSC has a great influence through its programs and through involving young people from diverse communities on the staff working on many social issues. The staff does a good job of orienting staff to Quaker testimonies and in this way encourages those who are interested to learn more about Friends. The overall support for AFSC by Quakers and Yearly Meetings make clear that AFSC is strongly rooted in Quakerism. By involving members of communities in working on a variety of problems through local organizing, AFSC has a respectful approach and encourages mutual problem solving.

We all appreciate the opportunity to represent SAYMA with the American Friends Service Committee and look forward to 2017 as an especially interesting time to be involved since it will be AFSC's 100th anniversary.

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