

Epistle from 8th Pacific Northwest Quaker Women's Theology Conference

To our Quaker family,

Surrounded by the waters and wildlife of Hood Canal and the snowy peaks of the Olympic Mountains, sixty women gathered in Seabeck, Washington from June 16-20, 2010 for the eighth Pacific Northwest Quaker Women's Theology Conference. Begun fifteen years ago to promote dialogue and build relationships among different Quaker traditions, this conference continues to be deeply Spirit led and enriches the lives of women who attend.

Though we represent different backgrounds and branches of Quakerism, the lines between these seemed very thin and blurred. No one avoided talking about her home meeting or church, but our membership didn't have as much weight as our personal experiences shared in love. Even as we attempted to be open and accepting, at times we misstepped and unintentionally hurt each other. Many of us felt broken open and left this conference changed.

Through reflection papers we wrote, plenary sessions, home groups and discussion, we each connected personally with the theme, "Walk With Me: Mentors, Elders, and Friends." Each plenary brought us back again and again to the awareness of the need for support and mentorship in our lives. We identified places in which we are being accompanied and are accompanying others and places where we feel the absence of that loving presence. Many of us made commitments to seek those relationships in our meetings, churches and beyond.

Despite colds, more serious illnesses and concerns for the health of loved ones, we drew strength, support, and encouragement from one another. Many think of the Women's Conference as a reunion and newcomers found they were welcomed into the family with open arms.

In keeping with the testimony of community, we opened ourselves to another group, Interplay, also staying at the conference center. We described the kind of work that we each came to do, invited them to join us in worship, and likewise were invited to experience their ministry and we shared grace together before meals.

We celebrated the gifts of many through plenaries, workshops, singing and readings by several published authors. During one plenary session, several young adults shared personal experiences of their ministries in relation to the theme of the conference. We were thrilled to hear stories of women being supported and held sacredly in their ministry. However, we were deeply saddened to learn that some are not empowered or recognized in their ministries. We were thus reminded of the reality of sexism in the Society of Friends. Encircling the young adult women, we joined together in heartfelt prayer and were moved by its healing and supportive power. This experience deepened our worship and fellowship together. We challenged ourselves to be aware of internalized sexism, as well as the sexism in our churches and meetings, and to work toward true equality.

During business meeting on Saturday, we reaffirmed the work of this body of women and our leading to continue meeting together as an intra-faith group. We look forward to the next opportunity to join in fellowship.