

Interrupting Harm with Care

A Message to Attenders at North Pacific Yearly Meeting 2023

from the Committee on Addressing Harm with Care

The Committee on Addressing Harm with Care (the “Care Committee”) for NPYM Annual Session 2023 invites Friends to live into our commitment to diversity and inclusion at this Annual Session with respect, courage, and curiosity. The Care Committee is the successor to last year’s “Community Guidelines” team. Our mission is to respond to harm with care, to listen with open hearts and minds, and to celebrate every opportunity to share, empathize, and live our testimonies of equality, integrity, and community.

Racism is woven into the society we live in. So are other forms of privilege and oppression. One Friend described their experiences among Friends with microaggressions, dismissal, and feeling invisible as “wear and tear on the soul.” Unfortunately, harm has occurred at Annual Session before, which we deeply regret. Acknowledging this is an essential first step. Friends who are not part of a marginalized group may not be directly harmed—may not even be aware of the harm – but we are all, nonetheless, profoundly injured by oppressions manifesting among us.

In working to uproot racism, transphobia, and homophobia from our lives and our Yearly Meeting, we all benefit, building our Beloved Community. We benefit by doing the sometimes-painful work of uncovering implicit biases in ourselves and each other, learning how a careless word can wound, coming to understand our own imperfections, offering apologies and seeking to repair the relationship when injuries occur. When a Friend of color shares that something hurt them, doing so is a priceless gift, however uncomfortable to receive. When a trans Friend gives the gift of the truth about the pain and frustrations they experience, cis Friends have an opportunity to empathize and grow. When a Friend acknowledges they have done harm and reaches out to try to mend it, that is an opportunity for healing and growth. We are grateful when Friends engage in this work together, with hearts open to expanding our experience of Divine love. For the core of care is not pain. It is love. When we open our hearts, express our pain, and empathize with the pain of others, we open ourselves to an upwelling of power, freedom, and joy. We allow ourselves to be changed.

We recognize that our commitment to interrupting harm means that at times worship or worship sharing may be interrupted, and that a Friend who harmed someone, unwittingly or not, may feel uncomfortable. We seek to be led by Divine guidance in making such interruptions or responding to them. We see this as part of the process of upholding and implementing our Uprooting Racism and Inclusion minutes. We believe Friends are strong enough to put up with the discomfort involved in healing harm, and wise enough to educate ourselves in a loving way about the damage done to our community when we fail to respond to harm with care. We invite you, Friends, to the challenge, delight, discomfort, healing, and connection of listening with care.

Some guidelines:

1. If you are part of a marginalized group and you are harmed, you may share your experience in the setting where the harm occurred. You do not need to explain to anyone what caused the harm, but you are welcome to do so and doing so will help our community learn and grow. Whether or not you say something when the harm occurred, feel free to seek out one of our volunteer Listeners after the incident.
2. If you hear or see something that you believe could have harmed someone who is part of a marginalized group, you may respond in several ways: in the moment, during a period of afterthoughts, or, if you're not sure, by bringing it to one of our volunteer Listeners. With Divine guidance, your interruption of a plenary, worship sharing, or meeting for worship is not different than being led to offer any vocal ministry. We ask that Friends bear in mind our shared commitment to learning together.
3. Remember each person is the expert on their own experience. No one is the expert on all situations or how best to respond to them. We will make mistakes. We will express regret, learn, and move forward together.
4. In responding to a harm, we ask you to use language other than the Ouch-Whoa-Oops formula. Some alternatives are offered below.

The Ouch-Whoa-Oops (OWO) tools we experimented with the last two years are used in some other Quaker organizations. Some Friends may continue to use OWO at Annual Session because they are familiar with it. But other Friends feel OWO has created distance, where our desire is to bring Friends closer together in Beloved Community. We remain fully committed to the goal of interrupting racial, transphobic, and homophobic harms as they occur during Annual Session, but ask Friends to consider other language. We invite Friends to follow a "hear something, say something" approach. Some alternate ways to interrupt harm include "I hear . . ." "I wonder . . ." "A pattern I recognize . . ." "Friends, remember to . . ." "I just realized . . ." or calling for silence. Our collective goal is to uproot oppression and inequality in our Yearly Meeting, not to use any specific set of words to do so. That means recognizing and interrupting harm from a place of love.

Please be tender toward one another. Communicate respect. Be honest. Exercise the discipline of deep listening.

As a committee, our first responsibility is to Friends who are harmed, offering empathy and seeking to build bridges of understanding that can support apologies and healing. We are also glad to listen to Friends who have done harm and are seeking clearness. The Care Committee hopes to shepherd this process of stretching, learning, and growing. We plan to have a Listener present, as last year, at designated places in the dining hall and designated times online, to hear from Friends who have experienced harm or who have done harm and are seeking clarity. We also want to follow up with Friends struggling with harm, to offer opportunities to be heard privately, and to help connect them, if they wish, with other resources.

In addition to listening in one of the scheduled times or places, these Listeners will be in contact with the Care Committee. If you would like a follow-up contact, please share your information with the Listener(s), and if you do not want follow-up, let us know! (We hope to follow up with everyone who contacts us, to be sure they are feeling OK.) We also can refer people needing or wanting more care to NPYM Ministry and Counsel Committee.

We are joyful, determined, and faithful about the journey our NPYM community is on. Muddling through, making mistakes, holding ourselves accountable, we will grow in love, empathy, respect, and mutual support. Together, we will rise toward our goal of Beloved Community.

The Care Committee includes some Friends who are part of the NPYM Anti-Racism Working Group. The working group would love to hear the experiences Friends are having with responding to harm with care in our meetings and worship groups, too. By practicing in our home meetings, we bring greater skill and comfort with the process to Annual Session. We value your contributions! Please email Jonathan Betz-Zall at jbetzzall@gmail.com with any learning you care to share. If your meeting has not yet begun this, please consider if you are led to bring experiences at Annual Session back to your monthly meeting or worship group.