An open letter to Friends Center for Racial Justice (FCRJ) and the Clerk of SAYMA

From the Ad Hoc Racial Justice Working Group at SAYMA [aka white people in support of the ministry of the Uplifting Racial Justice committee (URJ)]

Dear Friends,

We, the members of the Ad Hoc Racial Justice Working Group at SAYMA (RJWG), feel called to deeply reflect and respond to the ever-evolving issues we are experiencing at SAYMA. If we must choose one word to sum up what we are feeling, it is “frustration”. We are frustrated with the lack of progress on resolving conflicts and building trust within SAYMA, the lack of integrity and transparency in processes, and the lack of acting as a spiritual anti-racist faith community.

The purpose of this letter is to:

- express support for FCRJ being given the space to take up their work with SAYMA
- advocate for truth in regards to our process vis a vis URJ
- highlight accountability issues, especially with the Clerk of SAYMA

We strongly support SAYMA entering into serious transformative work under the leadership of Friends Center for Racial Justice (FCRJ). We have a minute from the body of SAYMA that reads “50-46-01: Friends approved Friends Center for Racial Justice to lead a called meeting for the purpose of understanding conflicts and building relationships of trust between SAYMA and the Uplifting Racial Justice Committee”.

We have now had almost two years of false starts and miscommunication stemming from white Friends refusing to recognize and allow the leadership of Friends Center for Racial Justice to help us transform our conflicts into positive movement towards being the open and welcoming multi-racial faith community that we claim we want to be. We are deeply concerned that individual Friends in positions of power in SAYMA may have once again stalled our relationship-building with FCRJ, before it has really even been given the chance to begin. To FCRJ we say: “these Friends do not speak for us”, and we are appalled and apologize for the disrespect FCRJ has experienced in SAYMA spaces. We hope that we can find new and creative ways to forge the bonds that will be required of us to move forward in our collective work. White Friends in positions of responsibility at SAYMA need to step aside from attempting to control the narrative and the process and allow FCRJ to take up their work.

In regards to URJ, it is important that Friends of Color within SAYMA have places to worship and do business without white participation or control. SAYMA has demonstrated repeatedly that white Friends in SAYMA are not yet ready to interact with BIPOC Friends in a way that is free of injury or controlling behaviors. URJ was set up to provide such spaces within SAYMA. This need requires change, and we suggest that as white Friends learn more about systemic and institutional racism, resistance to those changes will decrease. Friends can read about this same work happening at Friends General Conference, New England Yearly Meeting and New York Yearly Meeting. The membership of URJ and appointment of Clerk of URJ is the business of Friends of Color at SAYMA.
Our working group recognizes that there are issues among the BIPOC Friends of SAYMA, and we remind white Friends of the need to leave it to BIPOC to do the work to move through these issues. We believe that is possible with the support of FCRJ, and we support them in this work.

Some very serious wounding has occurred: between white Friends and BIPOC Friends, between BIPOC Friends, and between white Friends. We feel that at this point the heightened feelings throughout SAYMA require expression to a qualified third party (FCRJ) and that through their support of our own work, as individuals and as a body, we will collectively move to understanding, and allow new Light to come to us through their queries. We do not make assumptions as to the outcome of this work.

It pains us to report that our working group brings personal testimony that Friends in positions of responsibility at SAYMA are not acting and speaking with integrity. Our purpose here is not to individually call out members of our organization. However, we must particularly call on the Clerk of SAYMA to immediately cease contributing to and endorsing the false narrative that the body of SAYMA has made any decisions about the status of the Clerk of URJ and the URJ committee. Indeed, the Clerk of SAYMA is well aware that some Friends were prepared to stand in the way of decisions to remove the Clerk of URJ and the laying down of URJ if these questions came to the body.

We urge the Clerk of SAYMA to engage in this and all matters faithfully and with full transparency so that discernment is by the spiritual body of SAYMA and not manipulated using secular political tactics to control the narrative. There is a process for assisting the Clerk as a means to improve communication and discernment within SAYMA and that is the Clerk’s Advisory Committee, made up of the clerks of the standing committees [not a select few individuals with aligned agendas].

We call on the entire SAYMA community to sit with the following query from Friends General Conference in regards to decision-making: “How does this decision support [FGC] in its goal to transform into an actively anti-racist faith community?” Are we ready to do the internal work and self-education that it will take to become anti-racist? Did we mean what we said when URJ was established?

Our committee is united in the view that SAYMA cannot go ahead with any decisions while we continue to act as a secular gathering of secular representatives rather than as a spiritual community. We are not acting like a spiritual community. It is time to focus on spiritual deepening, self-education, and reflection. We urge individual Friends, all SAYMA committees, Monthly Meetings & Worship Groups to reflect deeply on the roles that we have each played in the continuing conflicts at SAYMA. We ask all Friends, and especially Ministry & Nurture, to take a more engaged approach to conflict transformation and in actions that could make our meetings more welcoming.

In deep discernment on way forward,

The Ad Hoc Racial Justice Working Group of SAYMA

Membership of SAYMA’s RJWG:
Karen Morris, Atlanta Friends Meeting
Melissa Preast, West Knoxville Friends Meeting
Susan Firestone, Atlanta Friends Meeting
Kit Potter, Nashville Friends Meeting
Margaret Farmer, Asheville Friends Meeting
Shannon Roberts Smith, Berea Friends Meeting