



2023 Yearly Meeting Epistle to Friends Everywhere

We send loving greetings to Friends everywhere.

Quakers in Australia gathered from 1-9 July 2023, online and in regional hubs. We met on the unceded country of many nations all around this land now called Australia. We welcomed a number of Friends from across the globe. There was much to choose from in a full and varied program of opportunities to worship, socialise, learn, share, and conduct our business. A program for children and young people provided both online connection and in-person activities in hubs. The Presiding Clerk reminded us to maintain an unhurried pace. Listening was a recurring theme. Speak softly, listen well. Listen to the speaker. Listen to Spirit. Listen to yourself.

The theme for the gathering was "Integrity, Voice and Right Relationship". This is a momentous year when Australians will vote about a change to the constitution to establish an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. We were welcomed by Ken Pengarta Lechleitner, Aboriginal elder from Anmatyerre country and Deb Buckskin from Kurna country, who taught us Ta marra, the gesture of two open hands which offers peace, friendship and unity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians again made a generous offer, and asked us to work together to build a better nation for us all.

In the State of the Society Address Mark Macleod (Tasmania Regional Meeting) reminded us not to focus on numbers, statistics and percentages, but on the qualities of our community as Quakers. This is the fourth year that Yearly Meeting has been held online. Our regional meetings weathered the pandemic, and learned that online meetings are accessible to remote Friends and people with disability in ways that in-person meetings are not. But children and young people relish in-person contact, and children are often absent from online meetings. A beloved attender, mourned by her Meeting, encouraged Friends to have fun, be kind, and laugh.

American Quaker Jon Watts delivered the Backhouse Lecture, "How my 2009 Viral Video Transformed my Perspective on Quakers, the Internet, and What's Next". He reflected on the example of early Quakers who began the practices of listening deeply and speaking as led by the Spirit. Young Quakers embraced their technology – the printing press – and spread the news about Quakerism through pamphlets. Jon Watts founded the YouTube channel QuakerSpeak, and encouraged us to embrace the technology available to us – the internet – to connect with all those people who are hungry for community, depth, quiet, and deep listening. "Sit with Friends. Listen deeply. Go boldly."

The foundation of our action is individual spiritual growth, nurtured in community. Yearly Meeting provided many opportunities to learn and share in small groups. Friends shared their experiences of active involvement in many and varied concerns, including the promotion of peace-making around the world and in our region, the climate emergency, integrity in public office, and exploring gender identity. In our special meeting for remembrance, we gave thanks for the Grace of God in the lives of our dear Friends who have died. It showed in their kindness and persistent advocacy for many social justice issues.

Elizabeth PO' (Western Australian Regional Meeting) shared "precious gleanings" from twenty-nine epistles from Quakers around the world. Common to many was the sense of urgency that people feel about the climate emergency. Others named the harms caused by Empire, such as racial, economic and social injustice. The urgent need for peace-making was highlighted by the

suffering of people in Ukraine. Further Epistles expressed spiritual hunger for prayer and God's guidance. One Yearly Meeting used pruning of plants as a metaphor for reshaping its practices to enable new growth to emerge.

The foundations of our business practices are still there, but Friends saw the need for some changes in our processes and structure. In our Formal Sessions, we were challenged to discern the right way to interact with overseas Friends, given the impact of travel on the planet and its inhabitants. We heard the challenges of finding names for roles, and we welcomed new and imaginative ways for Friends to serve Quakers Australia.

Some Friends saw the 2023 Salter Lecture given to the Socialist Quakers Society in Britain by Rupert Read. Titled "The horrible, wonderful truth about climate: how facing that truth changes everything." It is about the inevitable polycrisis which will force radical change on us in the cause of love for each other, our communities and world. We acknowledge the faithful Friends who feel compelled to take non-violent action, and we call out harsh government moves to outlaw environmental activism. This Yearly Meeting took place during a week when the highest global temperatures ever were recorded. The Meeting adopted the Action Plan devised by the Climate Emergency and Species Extinction Working Group, which calls on individual Friends and Meetings to make big changes in the way we live.

In response to Friends' concern about preparations for war, the Meeting issued a comprehensive statement opposing Australia's involvement in a new pact with the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS).

We were challenged to decolonise our thinking and walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in search of equity in our relationships. A public statement from Quakers Australia supported the full implementation of the Statement from the Heart. Dadirri is one Indigenous word for deep listening. Can we do that? We were asked what our response will be, as Quakers, to the result of the referendum. Are we prepared for this?

Yearly Meeting expressed heartfelt appreciation to Jacque Schultze, who served as the Secretary for seven years. Jacque regarded her work as ministry, and Friends acknowledged her kindness and grace amongst many fine qualities. We warmly welcomed the new office staff, Holly Dhynes as Communications and Publicity Manager, and David Tehr as the Coordinator.

We look forward to Yearly Meeting 2024, hosted by South Australia Northern Territory Regional Meeting (SANTRM). It will be in Adelaide, with both in-person and online meetings. For those Friends who make the journey, including children and young people, there will be the joy of meeting again at West Beach.

We share this gift from Justin Simpson (New South Wales Regional Meeting)

*Here we are
Here Now ...
In love and purpose
mystery and wonder
here we are.*

Australia Yearly Meeting 2023