

SUMMARY OF THE EPISTLES

Good evening, Friends,

This presentation could not have been undertaken without the enormous assistance and support of Jacque Schultze.

The summary of the Epistles is both a big responsibility and a wonderful opportunity to ponder the variety of Quaker experiences internationally. What is presented here reflects those experiences and the concerns of the individual Meetings whose Epistles we have received, and recognises themes that are common to many.

Sixteen Epistles are included: with the exception of Aotearoa/New Zealand all are from the northern hemisphere, six of them from the USA.

There are two from Uganda: the Epistle from Uganda Friends Church held in November and one from the United Society of Women held in December, which brought together 300 women after regional meetings at several venues over the course of 2021. Both were filled with photos and were more in the form of annual reports than the usual brief Epistle. In the first there was mention of a direct connection with Australia through Abel Sibonio, a Burundi Friend now living in Queensland.

There are two Epistles from Britain Yearly Meeting and two from British Junior Young Friends, the earlier ones held online, and the most recent two were hybrid gatherings, joyfully in person as well as online, with 'blended worship' on Sunday.

The emphasis that each of the Epistles places on various concerns reflects the nature of those Yearly Meetings. Some have a more "outward" approach and others concentrate to a greater degree on the situation in their immediate neighbourhood. Several of the American Yearly Meetings mentioned their mission work in other parts of the world.

Identifying themes common to many Meetings seemed one way to provide an overview of Quaker experiences over the year. Not surprisingly, the pandemic was noted by all, but there were other shared concerns.

THE PANDEMIC

The impact of the pandemic on Yearly Meetings varied depending on many factors, including when and where the Meeting was held. National and state restrictions were also factors in how some Meetings were organised. Several epistles noted with sadness the deaths of Friends who had succumbed to the disease.

Britain Yearly Meeting 2021 was held online and covered two weeks, taking as its central theme "Living equality and truth in a time of crisis." They were grateful for technology and the hard work of all (including the Woodbrooke team) who made the Meeting possible. However, they "greatly missed the opportunity of being together as an all-age community". A sentiment that was common to many.

Several of the American Friends' Meetings had embraced the opportunities that internet technology had provided: **Friends Church of North Carolina** (who met in person and virtually) had appointed a social media co-ordinator. She had been instrumental in assisting the mission work of Friends United Meeting internationally, as well as working with local Friends, to improve their ability to take advantage of social media.

Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative) acknowledged that “some Friends have not felt clear to join worship on Zoom, (but) it has allowed others living at a distance to participate more frequently”. They saw opportunities in midweek worship, Light Groups, Bible study groups and worship with other meetings, including joining with Pendle Hill. While they still felt connected to the world, they “missed the participation of our children and youth .. (as) it has made it especially hard for these young Friends to remain connected”.

Lake Erie Yearly Meeting, comprising Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan were “palpably aware of the skills, time and love of Friends with gifts in web-based organisations.....to make this kind of gathering possible as well as the foibles of individual internet connections”. They acknowledged that web conferencing reduced the carbon impact from travel but mourned the loss of personal connection, and the loss of a children’s program as young Friends are not interested in web-based interaction. They concluded that on screen it is harder to know when we are in unity.

Pacific Yearly Meeting “were excited to see the faces of Quakers from California, Nevada, Hawaii, Mexico and beyond” as it was their second annual session via Zoom”, but noted that “in this age of more digital communications, the administrative work required has expanded even as the available volunteer energy has declined”. As a result, they approved hiring a half-time administrative assistant.

North Pacific Yearly Meeting, by gathering virtually, was able to welcome visitors from Friends General Conference, Friends World Committee on Consultation (FWCC), Friends Committee on National Legislation and Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting representatives.

In an effort to overcome the isolation of being unable to meet in person, they had organised worship groups and interest groups for several weeks before Yearly Meeting, including small group socialising to “renew and strengthen ourselves and our communities so that we can be the Quakers the world needs”.

They “heard a moving report from Junior Friends with a long list of what they miss about meeting in person, including cuddle-puddles and falling out of hammocks”.

By October, European restrictions had eased sufficiently to allow **Yearly Meeting of Germany and Austria** to meet in person with strict hygiene guidelines in place for 100 members and delegates from other Yearly Meetings at Pymont Quaker House. The physical presence of children and youth groups was missed (but) there was a large group of under-18-year-olds who had gathered in Benkendorf some days earlier.

The **Yearly Meeting of Quakers in France** took place over a long weekend, at La Solitude, the spiritual centre of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux. Using both English and French, they welcomed a new group – Nouvelle Aquitaine. During COVID all encounters had to be held online and there was a sense that this had in fact brought their geographically scattered community much closer together.

The Uganda Friends Church Meeting was held at Mbale Friends Church in November and was able to welcome over 200 delegates from Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda and the USA.

The Epistle from the United Society of Friends Women Uganda took place the following month, after several regional meetings over 2021. They acknowledged the way their activities had been crippled by the pandemic throughout 2020, were grateful for being able to meet in person this year, but remained anxious about the impact of the new variants of COVID.

Also in December, the heads of 7 Quaker agencies held a hybrid gathering over three days in London. They noted that the “pandemic has changed our lives and the societies we live in amplifying the inequalities which were already present”. Five of the seven agencies will have new leadership during 2022, and gathering in person had much enriched the way in which the insights and experience of those laying down their service were able to be shared.

Perhaps the best demonstration of how the pandemic had limited face-to-face contact, particularly with young people, was the most recent Epistle from **Britain Junior Yearly Meeting** who was able to meet in person for the first time in three years. They rejoiced that “we all left this event with a stronger sense of who we are and what we stand for”. One of the most important elements of JYM was ‘the warm and supportive community that we created’.

The **Aetearoa/New Zealand** Yearly Meeting held at the end of April still felt that the lingering COVID made it unsafe and inequitable to gather in Christchurch as planned. They recognised that the online format allowed them to “welcome visitors from FWCC including Asia West division represented by Adrian Glamorgan, General Secretary of FWCC and Friends from Seoul Monthly Meeting. Aletia Dundas represented Australia YM.”

Britain Yearly Meeting 2022, which was held at the end of May, was a hybrid gathering, with 200 Friends meeting in person, joined by others online from around the country. On Sunday there was an “All Together Worship” when 78 Meetings and 290 individuals held a Meeting for Worship, perhaps a new way to build Quaker communities.

RACISM

I pondered whether this theme should in fact be inequality and racism, and still remain uncertain.

Britain Yearly Meeting 2021 took as its theme “For our comfort and discomfort: living equality and truth in a time of crisis”. They noted that they wrestled with what it meant to be truly committed to anti-racism, and recorded the ministry of one Friend of colour who said:

“All I have ever wanted for the longest time is to feel equal, and again, here in this room, I don’t.”

The Epistle went on to acknowledge that “racism is systemic to most white people, including white Quakers; it is largely invisible”. The Meeting felt challenged to declare its commitment to becoming an actively anti-racist faith community.

The 2022 Meeting was “saddened and ashamed to hear personal experiences of racism” and, having heard about Quaker engagement in the transatlantic slave trade, concluded that “it is important to recognise its enduring consequences on lives in the present.”

North Pacific Yearly Meeting acknowledged that “Friends are committed to uprooting racism (and) at this annual session concentrated on stopping the harm done by racial micro-aggressions or micro-assaults”. The practice of calling out such instances, by saying “Ouch” if they were felt, or “Whoa” if they were observed or “Oops” if someone made the mistake themselves, was introduced.

Lake Erie Yearly Meeting held a plenary session entitled “From Truth to Healing with Native Peoples” that concentrated on the local history of land acquisition for farming and Quaker management of three of the many native Indian boarding schools in the region. The session concluded by recognising the need for healing for the colonisers as well as the colonised by acknowledging the harm done, apologising, forgiving, atoning and repairing. The Meeting

acknowledged its lack of diversity and sought to wrestle with racism and other oppressive habits, traditions and practices that separates members from those who seem different.

Pacific Yearly Meeting Epistle was led by its Racial Justice Subcommittee to begin the process of creating a sacred space in which healing and transformation can occur. They too adopted the practice of “Oops, Ouch, and Whoa”. The two keynote speakers included poetry and stories about the multi-generational trauma they had experienced by being non-white in the United States. One of the two recounted how a poem of hers about street children had resonated so deeply that a young girl embraced her on the subway system saying “thank you, nobody ever talks to us”.

They encouraged Friends everywhere to give up the expectation of comfort in conversations about race. Discomfort is natural – it means that we are growing. We must create ways to help each other be brave.

The Heads of Quaker Agencies affirmed its commitment to dismantle and prevent the presence of institutional oppression within its organisations, and explored what it means to be an anti-racist and anti-oppression organisation, but acknowledged that more work was essential to build a shared understanding. This might entail discomfort and difficult conversations. They concluded their time together with the exhortation to Friends to be humble and to be bold, to be faithful and determined.

THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Perhaps not surprisingly, **North Pacific Yearly Meeting** was acutely aware of how climate change was having a direct impact in their region. Their theme for the year was Courage in the face of fear, where they asked “What are the stories we tell about the past year of heat, smoke, pandemic, social, political and environment challenges? What might a right relationship with the living world be like for you? What have you learned over the past year that informs your vision of a new future?” The keynote speaker took as her subject “Courage, Fear and Care: Creating Resilient Communities to meet Climate Justice”.

At its 2021 gathering **Britain Yearly Meeting** noted that it had been 10 years since its commitment to becoming a low-carbon, sustainable faith community, and decided that it must continue to act with urgency and imagination.

German Friends felt that the pandemic had upstaged other major concerns including matters environmental. They encouraged the continuation of involvement in local initiatives with community organisations and took heart from the personal witness of individual Friends.

French Friends too recognised that there were not many activities under a Quaker banner, but that individual members were committed to local actions and within larger charity organisations.

As elsewhere around the world, **Junior Young Friends** in Britain are particularly concerned about climate justice. Both the 2021 and 2022 Epistles talk of the need for a faith grounded in conscientious action and positive change, and pointed to the work of QUNO in working towards climate justice.

THE PEACE TESTIMONY

Quaker commitment to peace building was a thread that was woven through many of the Epistles in the concerns around racism, equality and climate justice. However, of the six Epistles

from the United States only the North Pacific Yearly Meeting mentioned directly the work of Friends Peace Teams and their Alternative to Violence project, where presentations described the work and how they had experimented with Alternatives to Violence training online. It concluded with an invitation for those present to get involved.

German, Austrian and French Friends all felt that participating in local vigils both as individuals and under a Quaker banner was important. The French Epistle wryly noted that they were meeting in La Solitude, surrounded by a sea of vineyards, when France was the third largest exporter of both wine and arms in the world.

The Heads of Agencies Meeting in December last year explored “how we are called to engage in peace-building at home” and acknowledged a need to confront the violence that exists in global North countries.

CONCLUSION

Throughout most of the Epistles ran a sense that we are tired and a little overwhelmed after the last few years. There was a feeling that volunteers were reluctant to take on new roles or felt stretched in their existing ones. Several Meetings decided that some tasks could not be done without employing staff.

Streamlining Quaker business was how Britain’s Junior Friends put it. They saw Quakerism as a faith grounded in action for positive change.

I would like to conclude this summary with the words of Iowa Friends:

“As we reflected on how we might more rightly share the world’s resources, address systemic violence including racism, and repair our relationships with the natural world, we were reminded that we do not need to be afraid. We do not walk alone.”

*Heather Saville, NSWRM
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