

STATE OF THE SOCIETY 2023

Friends, I felt a deep sense of fear and responsibility when I was asked to offer you an answer to the question, 'What is the State of the Religious Society of Friends in Australia today?'

Fear, because as I listened to State of the Society addresses in recent years, I had felt myself sinking under the growing gap between the number of challenges that confront our faith, and the declining number of Friends available to meet them. Responsibility, because I felt called to bring my optimism and creativity to the task of helping our community to bridge that gap.

I am happy to report that my fear was not justified.

If you are expecting to hear an annual reading of the balance sheet of membership and attendance here, I am going to disappoint you. One of the most disabling changes in my professional life, and I suspect in your own professional experience too, has been a shift in emphasis from quality to quantity. As a young educator I used to feel grateful that Australian students didn't bypass my narrative feedback as students elsewhere did and turn straight to the number pencilled on the last page of their assignments. Sadly, however, Australian students began to focus solely on that number years ago. And we can't blame them. They've grown up in a society that seems to care only about raw statistics and percentages.

If you want a quantified approach to this report and need to know how many members and attenders there are in the Religious Society of Friends today, I believe that distinction - for a start - is an impediment to our growth, and I am not going to focus on it here. Let's remember two things. First, that early Friends were few in number, and many were young in age and inexperienced. Second, that as any student of storytelling and human endeavour will tell you, one of the most compelling narrative features of human stories is that for thousands of years and in countless communities around the world, stories of great achievers and great achievements begin with either an individual, or a small group expressing fear that they are not up to the task before them.

So, whatever the numbers on the spreadsheet turn out to be (when you check them) in the long run they are not relevant to the question of the *quality* of our travelling in the spirit.

I want to mention in passing the title of a book by the Swiss writer Rolf Dobelli: *Stop Reading the News* (2020). Of course, I love our commitment to living in the world, and working to create a better world, so I am not suggesting for a moment that we ignore what is going on about us. But Dobelli has a point when he argues that the news is full of events that we can do absolutely nothing about, presented for their sensational content - and it therefore robs us of the energy and the will to act. If we focus relentlessly on the vastness of the task ahead of us and the poverty of our resources, we risk losing the creativity and determination that have been given to us to make whatever changes we can.

We live at time that is almost obsessed with outcomes: how many, how big, how much, how far, how high, how deep - but not as interested in the journey or the process that led to these celebrated outcomes. I'm reminded of the words about great achievement in *Quaker Faith & Practice* 21.43

It has been a theme in recent years to refer to the fact of aging in our Society, and that is where this quote from *Quaker Faith & Practice* begins.

'If we are getting older it will be harder to acknowledge that we have not been called to spectacular service, that we are unlikely now to make a stir in the world, that our former dreams of doing some great healing work had a great deal of personal ambition in them.

A great many men and women have had to learn this unpalatable lesson - and then have discovered that magnificent opportunities lay all around them. We need not go to the ends of the earth to find them; we need not be young, clever, fit, beautiful, talented, trained, eloquent or very wise. We shall find them among our neighbours as well as among strangers, in our own families as well as in unfamiliar circles - magnificent opportunities to be kind and patient and understanding.'

- Clifford Haigh 1962

So, what is the quality of our travelling in the spirit? Friends, generally speaking we are in good shape. Being forced to do less in a physical sense for two years has encouraged us to focus at last on *being* Quakers, rather than *running* Quakers. We've been talking about that goal for several years, and we still have some way to go. During the discernment of how we were going to manage the work of the Yearly Meeting secretary, for example, I rarely heard the proposition that we could do less. There seemed to be an acceptance that the load of administration was immovable; we just had to find enough people and hours to share that load. I think we are still to evaluate the worth of some of the administration we accept as a given, because some of what we do has become an end in itself.

But the focus on ministry, learning and spiritual nurture reported by all meetings suggests that we understand very well where future change and growth will come from. Canberra & Region Quakers refer to a journey of 'rebuilding'. You can hear a sigh of relief in every one of this year's regional meeting reports: that it was at last safe to hold in-person meetings for worship again; that, as so many Friends had wished during the pandemic years, we could 'get back to normal'. But as the US writer Roxane Gay remarked, getting back to normal was the *last thing* that was wanted by those in need of social justice. So, it has been a time of rethinking and reframing.

And contrary to the reluctance and even resentment initially expressed at the introduction of online meetings for worship during the pandemic, each meeting reports that Zoom has extended and often deepened our spiritual life and brought out our inclusiveness and creativity. We were able in an unprecedented way to include Friends who live remotely, or who could not attend a meeting house due to illness or disability, and also Friends whose busy work schedule or family life make them time poor. NSW Regional Meeting reports alternatives tried by local meetings during the pandemic in addition to hybrid meetings: outdoor meetings for worship, small home meetings, with appropriate protocols, breakfast groups. Even with the return to in-person worship, meetings report the successful inclusion of strategies learnt during the pandemic, and there seems to be no reason now to abandon hybrid meetings, since we have upgraded our technology and our skills in handling it.

Naturally, there is still some uncertainty. When I hear an occasional Friend express a refusal to engage with the technology - and one meeting mentions the refusal of some Friends to do so - I'm reminded of my parents saying that television would fry our brains, or further back those audiences who were terrified at the first moving pictures of a steam train because they thought it might actually come through the walls, or further back again, the people who said that reading novels would send people mad. On the whole, we learnt during the pandemic years that the technology itself was not the problem. Regional meetings report that we have learnt to manage the technology to our advantage, and that where there is still fear, what is required is not ostracism, but continued support for learning.

One concern expressed by several meetings is that while meeting for worship, meeting for business, and yearly meeting have all proved both possible and convenient online, we are still searching for ways to engage with the social needs that are best satisfied by in-person meetings. Zoom is sometimes called a 'cold medium'. Our Presiding Clerk suggests that perhaps a way to warm it up is to make the Zoom gallery less stiffly formal, by using our hands and facial expressions appropriately.

Meetings around the world have found that they need to accompany online or hybrid meetings with more shared lunches, discussion groups, working bees and in-person opportunities for pastoral care and political action, which are increasingly important for rebuilding the community. As I read these concerns, I wonder if we are using technology as creatively as we could, though. The Quakers Australia Facebook site is a friendly source of information and inspiration about history and faith, with appealing video clips and links to reading resources, and I admire it - but its aim is information rather than fellowship and fun. Outside my life in the meeting, I've recently become a member of two online Facebook groups: one called *The Unusual Suspects*, the other called *That's it! I'm Moving to Tassie!* They're both private groups, accessed by invitation and moderated, so they are safe, and the requirement is that you should have recently moved to Tasmania or be intending to do so. Weekly walks and lunches, afternoon teas, swap meets are organised by members, and terrific chats and photographs are posted by those who attended. The sites are jumping with energy, and they change every day, so there's always a reason to check them out. Might that be a way of organising social contacts that appears less formal than the weekly e-notices announcements? Silver Wattle has developed an engaging Facebook page, which includes us in the dailiness of life at that special place, so for Friends the creative precedents are there. Perhaps we're missing an opportunity.

After the pandemic, all meetings acknowledge reduced numbers of those attending in-person meetings for worship, but also steady growth, and they report a number of new enquiries - some of which have resulted in regular attendance and applications for membership. The months, the years of lockdown, were a time of reflection for not just faith communities, but for everyone. And one result has clearly been people looking for a new direction in life, and turning to communities with a purpose. How does our online presence reflect what they might find? In a world in which everyone seems to be reaching out, either in person or on any number of platforms, does our traditional fear of proselytising make us appear aloof, uninterested, indifferent? Do we need to rethink that reluctance? How might we manage greater outreach with integrity? The Quakers Australia site looks well organised and purposeful, but does it also look enjoyable? Maybe even warm and fun? Those desires need not be incompatible.

Western Australia Regional Meeting expresses a desire for meetings to become more inclusive. Several meetings are searching for ways to include young people. One interesting outcome of the pandemic years was that while older Friends found online technology a challenge, for young people it was all too familiar, and what emerged as a need for them was in-person social connection. This remains a challenge, because the number of families with children recorded in membership lists is not aligned with the number actually attending meeting for worship. What could we be doing to close that gap? How do we reach them? Some meetings report a variety of family-friendly social gatherings.

The need to find new ways of including children and young people is about ensuring a future for the Society, but we need to be inclusive in other ways too. Some meetings report success in bridging isolation with 'Know Your Friend' days. Some meetings have organised opportunities for greater learning in the lead up to the referendum on an Aboriginal Voice to Parliament. Friends in Stitches continues to be an inspiring example of a group of Friends coming together with a special interest. Rainbow Friends and Allies online meeting and Friends Online Recognised Meeting both address inclusion in different ways which are deepening our spiritual lives and connections across vast

distances and different time zones. At a time when so many reports in the media are about its divisiveness, technology is making inclusion easier.

Because all meetings report that nominations committees find the bringing forward of names for various roles increasingly difficult, though, what opportunities are we offering new attenders to belong to and serve the community? How are we adjusting the scope of the roles we ask Friends to accept, and how creative are we being in the discernment process? I wonder whether we've fully realised that the willingness of our parents to join a committee for three years and attend monthly committee meetings might not be shared by busy families and younger people today. Perhaps accepting the gig economy and asking someone to join a group for a few months until a specific task is completed and they can move on, is a strategy better aligned with working and family lives now. Perhaps we need to rethink our reliance on committees.

And how long do you have to attend meeting for worship to be asked whether your name can be brought forward for a role in the life of the meeting? Why do we keep asking the same people again and again? All meetings report the exhaustion experienced by care committees, in particular, during the pandemic years, and one regional meeting was even asked to consider laying down the role of a care committee altogether. One answer is to be more focused about the work we are trying to do, to encourage more Friends to join in - however limited they feel their time and talents are - and to make sure that they are nurtured spiritually in the work they undertake, and are encouraged to learn and to grow. Working together is an opportunity to get to know one another, and to build a community.

As has always been the case, regional meetings report inspiring action for peace and justice and there is in all reports an awareness that Quakers are called to respond to climate change and species extinction. Some meetings have chosen to make this a standing item on the agenda of meetings for worship for business; other meetings concerned that making it a standing item might in fact dull our motivation have chosen not to do so. Regardless of the approach, the urgency is acknowledged. Many Friends feel led to support the Integrity of Public Office project driven by NSW regional meeting, and share SANTRM's concern about the increasing militarisation of not just Australia's foreign affairs, but its domestic economy. But as West Chester meeting in the United States asks, where should we best put the energy of a smaller group of people? We are called on to return to our testimonies, and in prayerful and quiet discernment, enable them to guide our next steps forward.

There are many possibilities for reframing and reaffirming our testimonies and the State of our Society is that we are listening for them. I am excited by the possibilities. We are taking it slowly, carefully, prayerfully, because we want to make sure that the reframing is sound. In 2023, everyone has a microphone; everyone has a platform. But the guidance of *Quaker Faith & Practice* 2.90 speaks to our condition.

'What is required is a willingness to listen to what others have to say rather than to persuade them that one's own point of view represents what is right and proper. It also requires restraint. The reiteration of one point by several Friends each in their own way lends no weight to the point. What the meeting must learn to discern is its rightness, not how many people support it...

When conflict comes, as it does, and the temptation to compromise - to seek consensus - is resisted, the sense of divine guidance is unmistakably registered. New possibilities for a way forward which nobody has thought of emerge out of discussion. Postponement and delay settle minds and assist the process of coming to a united mind. Above all, those who take opposing views come to find that the discipline of waiting has mysteriously united them.'

- John Punshon 1987.

That, Friends, is the way forward, but at the same time I am strongly drawn to a line in the report from Queensland Regional Meeting: 'In August several Friends attended the funeral and celebration of the life of one of our long-term attenders and a great contributor to the Brisbane Local Meeting, Jenny Woodrow, and these were the words she left for us. Have Fun. Be Kind. Laugh. A simple yet challenging proposal.'

Mark Macleod
Tasmania Regional Meeting