

State of the Society Address 2022

"I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness." – George Fox

Initial thoughts

Friends¹, we've been through some tough times these past few years, both individually and collectively. Each person hearing or reading this address will have had their own experience of the COVID pandemic and the ways that family and friends have been separated or forced to live and work together in extremely close quarters. There has been the pain of lost connections and loneliness alongside the yearning for just a bit of space and solitude; the busyness of having too much to do balanced against the challenges for some of losing work and feeling idle. And Quaker meetings and committees, both local and national, have had similar experiences. They have been challenged to re-imagine what it means to live out our testimony to community in these times of isolation, virtual gatherings and the ever-present reminder to keep a safe social distance.

In order to prepare for this State of the Society address, I did as those before me have done, and read through the Regional Meetings' Reports and Documents in Advance of this Yearly Meeting 2022. I also put out a survey, where individual Friends had the opportunity to share their experiences of how our society has prospered. And I listened to what was sometimes being said beneath the words.

In discerning an answer to the question *"What is the State of the Religious Society of Friends in Australia today?"* I have come to the feeling that we are in a tough place; for many it's not over-stating it to say that there is an ocean of darkness. But as philosopher Benjamin Blood said in 1860 *"There is a crack in everything that God has made; but through that crevice enters the light of heaven."*

Broken and traumatised

Every report, and in the essence of what individual Friends have shared, COVID and its impacts has been front of mind this past year. While different Regional Meetings have experienced COVID very differently, many voices expressed a yearning to gather in person again, and almost a sense that until we meet again in person "it doesn't really count". Some people can't easily access online meetings, and for others the experience is deeply unsatisfying. Children and Junior Young Friends (JYFs) had been particularly affected by the lack of face-to-face gatherings. The biggest challenge for the Children and JYF Coordinators has been figuring out how to support young people, families and meetings in the absence of Yearly Meeting gatherings and camps, which are usually the glue that holds them together.

At the time of reporting, South Australia and Northern Territory Regional Meeting (SANTRM) had just opened up its borders, while Tasmania Regional Meeting (TRM) hadn't yet. Canberra and Region Quakers (CRQ) were still dealing with the compounding impacts of the bushfires in 2019, as well as more recent lockdowns. Most Regional Meetings were using a mix of online and in person gatherings. On the one hand, online meetings have increased accessibility for many, with West Australia Regional Meeting (WARM) investing in technology in order to attract and

¹ I use Friends throughout to refer to both Members and Attenders.

nourish those living remotely, and SANTRM also noted that the online option increases accessibility. New South Wales Regional Meeting (NSWRM) and Victoria Regional Meeting (VRM) are now used to hybrid or fully online Meetings for Worship for Business. While Queensland Regional Meeting (QRM) has been less affected by lockdowns, online and hybrid gatherings have been explored as a way to connect with remote and isolated Friends. I see all of these experiences as indicative of our collective desire to be inclusive, to be in community with one another and to take up opportunities presented by a crisis.

As Arundhati Roy has said, *'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next'*

Indeed, one unintended advantage of the situation we find ourselves in has been the establishment and continuation of online meetings for worship that span the usual geographic divide. Although the Online Recognised Meeting, which gathers on Sundays at 5pm AEST, had begun before the pandemic hit, it has since become a Recognised Meeting under the care of NSWRM and has 20-25 attenders each week who join from several states of Australia and from overseas. The Rainbow friends and allies online group meets on the 4th Sunday of each month and has a roster of Elders as well as social time at the end of worship. The under 50s-ish group began meeting fortnightly right after its Yearly Meeting 2021 birth, and now sees half a dozen Friends meet together on the second Sunday of the month. These groups have offered fellowship for isolated Friends or those who are not easily able to access Sunday morning worship.

Numbers and feelings

Many Friends are concerned about the numbers – that our numbers of members and attenders are gradually declining, that there are fewer people to take on committee responsibilities, and that we are an aging population. The 2016 Census data indicates that more than 70% of those who identified as Quaker were over the age of 50, twice as many as the rest of the population. This means that children, JYFs, Young Friends and all the adults up to the age of 50 make up only 30% of our society! By looking at the statement of membership for the past three years, graciously provided by our ever-patient Secretary, I can see that numbers of members, attenders and children of the meeting have all indeed steadily declined. In 2021 we had 102 children compared with 134 in 2019. We have 1,432 adult members and attenders compared with 1,540 in 2019.² Percentage-wise we have 76% of the children we had 2 years ago, and 92% of the adults, so our numbers of children are declining more significantly than our adults.

While some committees and regional meetings are also complaining that they're aging (the Werona Collective) or struggling to find people to fulfil roles (SANTRM, YM Organising Committee, The Australian Friend Committee), individual Friends are echoing these sentiments, speaking of feeling anxious about declining numbers, our shrinking community, our endless busyness, and the unrealistic expectations we place on volunteers.

In keeping with this theme, we hear that the Secretary's workload has changed dramatically in recent years, expanding both in terms of expectations and responsibilities. It was felt that a more thorough review was needed and a working party has been appointed to consider how the work of the Secretary might be re-configured in future, which is another opportunity to imagine our world anew.

² We had 652 attenders compared with 709 in 2019, and 780 members compared to 831 in 2019.

Despite the overall picture being grim, there are flickers of hope. CRQ reports that Goulburn meeting has a strong group of JYFs and QRM reports several new attenders under the age of 30yrs!! TRM want to “release the joy of being Quakers” and free it up from the business of “running Quakers”. VRM has found the paper “Some Thoughts On The Right Ordering Of Carts & Horses” by Chris Warner helpful, which points to the demands on Friends’ time and energy for inward facing roles amongst other concerns.

Looking at the other types of numbers, the AYM finances remain stable. Cash flow is lower, partly due to COVID Government payments ending, but we also have had lower costs due to meetings being held online. Some meetings are seriously considering financial viability (NSWRM) or the future of meeting houses (QRM). Yet, some Regional Meetings and committees report that finances are in surprisingly good shape – VRM had an unexpected surplus and the Thanksgiving Fund and new Jan de Voogd Peace Fund both benefitted from significant bequests. To me, these new funds provide opportunities for groups of Friends and individual Friends to pursue leadings and passions, to perhaps reimagine ways of working or living out our beliefs that were previously not possible.

For me, more than the dwindling numbers of people in attendance, I’m concerned about how people are feeling about our society. For some, there’s very little to be excited about. When I asked in my survey what’s working well for you at the moment about Quakers in Australia, several people said “not much”. There’s a lack of connection, we’re not listening to our core testimonies, and some referenced the lack of diversity in our gatherings as a particular concern. There’s a sense of despair, of feeling directionless, not dealing well with conflict, and not knowing one another anymore in the things that are eternal. Are we, as one Friend put it, more focussed on the letter than the spirit?

Spiritual life

In some ways, it was hard to discern how the Spirit is moving amongst us. Regional Meetings report that they are continuing to explore their spiritual life through various online and in person processes. NSWRM has been working through “A Voice in the Wilderness: Listening to the Statement from the Heart”. TRM asked friends to consider “How am I travelling in the Spirit?” VRM has supported a Light group exploring: “Silence, discomfort and Spirit”. Many from the Climate Emergency and Species Extinction Working group and a few other Friends, took part in an online Woodbrooke course: “Responding to Ecological Crisis: Quaker Spiritual Insights”. However, I can’t help but wonder what has come of these processes and courses? Where is the evidence of the Truth prospering amongst us as a result?

In the responses of individual Friends through my survey, I gleaned more perhaps of how our spiritual life has prospered, or not. One Friend shared that being a Quaker still feels a bit spiritually lonely. Another said that we seem forever stuck on the shore of the ocean of light, and rarely take more than a few steps into it. In “The Right Ordering Of Carts & Horses” the concern is raised about us putting community before worship in the days of online meetings.

One area of hope for me was the Videos for Australian Quaker Voices prepared by the AYM IT Committee, with valuable study questions written by Emily Chapman-Searle. They are really honest portrayals of our values, spiritual life and action. In these short episodes, Friends speak about how they experience Meeting for Worship, how they live out the testimonies and what makes their heart sing. For some, there are times when Meeting for Worship has felt ecstatic, in perhaps the way that the early Friends were seeking. The episode on Gender and Relationships talks about Quakers being a safe place to follow one’s identity journey alongside a faith journey. The Rainbow Friends and Allies Share and Tell about

“Spiritual and Gender Diversity” which was held on 19th June 2022 enabled those present to hear from Friends with a lived experience of being trans and/or non-binary, and to consider the idea of Quakers in Australia deliberately stating an intention to welcome gender diverse seekers, as Britain Yearly Meeting has done, and Aotearoa / New Zealand Yearly Meeting is also considering. For me, this feels like our next big area of growth.

I recently was interviewed by the Creators of Peace, a group that shares many values with Quakers. When I was asked why Quakers are only just now coming to an awareness about gender identity concerns, I found myself talking about the theological concept of continuous revelations, and the idea that laying down swords and giving up slaves were also challenging shifts that only happened very incrementally, and because one or two Friends continued to advocate persistently for change. While Quakers in Australia still have a distance to travel in terms of our inclusion of gender diversity, we also have something unique to offer the world – we are willing to challenge ourselves on our own prejudice and are not afraid to reach out to and hear from those on the margins.

How we are active in the world

As always, Friends have been active in the world this past year. Friends in NSW participated in the Raising Peace Festival. In Queensland, Friends have been picketing the Land Forces Expo, and sending paper cranes to Osaka meeting in Japan. A Climate Action vigil was held outside Josh Frydenberg’s office in Victoria. As a collective we are wanting to be more engaged with our Pacific neighbours through the Pacific Conference of Churches and the Pacific Church Partnership Advocacy Network (PCPAN). We play an active role in several peace and justice groups and the Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee (QPLC) continues to produce informative policy briefs. Quaker Service Australia continues its support to partners internationally and with First Nations communities.

One significant development this past year was the establishment of the AYM Climate Emergency and Species Extinction working group, whose name inspires a sense of the radical honesty that early Friends were known for. Yet, despite the promising name, my sense is that the working group hasn’t yet found its groove, having just begun a time of scoping and reflection. I wonder, like some who responded to my questionnaire, what is holding us back from our radical roots? One friend said, “Even environmental issues which are so important seem to get little active public participation except from the mainly older Friends.” Of course, as we learnt earlier, 70% of us ARE older Friends.

The climate emergency is an area where we clearly feel Quakers can and must act, drawing on our radical roots. Yet, we are not in unity on how to go about this. Indeed, I notice that we hold several tensions about this in parallel. We want to meet together face to face, and yet we want to reduce carbon emissions. Some of us want to influence policy change through advocacy, others want to engage in radical nonviolent direct action, and others want to reduce their individual carbon footprint. I am reminded of a recurring debate amongst flatmates several years ago. We were a household made up of climate activists, community energy scientists, policy influencers, and hippies. Eventually, after many discussions about who was most righteous, we came to the conclusion that all these contributors make up the climate justice movement and all are equally important to the cause.

Rumbling with vulnerability

Thinking about the Climate Emergency, as well as several other matters or processes before Yearly Meeting such as the Review of QSA and AYM, the review of the AYM Secretary's role, Standing Committee's concerns about online meetings, and other murmurings, I found myself wondering if there is a pattern emerging. I've had a sense when reading some of the documents that there are strong feelings and opinions sometimes sitting beneath carefully crafted words. In these areas of our collective action and being in the world I sense we haven't reached unity, or there is ongoing uncertainty about roles, or some Friends might feel strongly that existing ways of doing things "wouldn't have occurred to me". I wonder whether some power dynamics are at play, and we are not always "speaking plainly" about what is actually bothering us.

Brene Brown, the famous researcher of shame, talks about rumbling with vulnerability. Are there difficult conversations we need to have with one another and as a society, but don't know how to begin? What are the stories we're telling ourselves about "those other Quakers who are doing it wrong"? Which shortcomings are we less comfortable confronting in ourselves?

I appreciate Advices & Queries 5: *"Take time to learn about other people's experiences of the Light.. Remember the importance of the Bible, the writings of Friends and all writings which reveal ways of God. As you learn from others, can you in turn give freely from what you have gained? While respecting the experiences and opinions of others, do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value. Appreciate that doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light that is in all of us".*

Letting the light in

Several years ago I participated in Meeting for Learning. During the second retreat, I read Margory Post Abbot's book *"To be broken and tender: a Quaker theology for today"*. I was drawn to the phrase 'broken and tender' because that's how I was feeling at the time, but quickly learnt that the meaning was in fact a little different. The words broken and tender are used to describe a community (a Quaker community specifically) that is thriving, nourishing, open and connected. The broken part talks of breaking open our hearts enough to allow the light to shine in, (in much the same way as Benjamin Blood has described it) or breaking the earth in order to allow a seed to grow. The tenderness is about tenderness to the spirit, or an openness to being led in unexpected directions. A broken and tender community contains people who have "broken apart the bounds of the ego", and experienced pure love. It is ready and able to be tender in the care of its members and more passionate in its concern for the wellbeing of the world.

What an apt intention for us! We are a bit broken in the sense that I originally understood the term, but we are offered the opportunity for that brokenness to allow for the light to shine in and fresh seeds to grow. We can either wallow in the broken-ness, or look to the light shining through the cracks. I was struck by the words of the Werona collective in their report: *"Kangaroo Valley is looking green, lush and beautiful. The rains in recent months have renewed the vegetation which was devastated by the bushfires."* Like the bushfire ravaged lands in southern New South Wales, the ecology of our community has been ravaged and traumatised by recent events. Yet we are already seeing signs of renewal, and long dormant seeds and shoots are given the opportunity to sprout and flourish, perhaps enabling greater diversity, richness and a new home for some.

Indeed, when I asked what is exciting about Quakers in Australia, one Friend reflected that *“Constant reinvention and re-relevance-making is a Quaker requirement - any group faces the challenges and opportunities of working to renew their potency and capacity - this excites me to see what arises as a Quaker corporate response to the changing essence of Australian society and the world.”*

Another Friend suggested that we might have a “jubilee year” where we lay everything down except Meeting for Worship, and the desire to know one another in the things eternal. Another said “We just need to live up to our leadings and we will always provide a home for many spiritual seekers.”

Friends, I was recently reminded of the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery. Kintsugi, meaning “golden repair”, is a process of mending the broken areas of a damaged bowl or cup with gold, silver or platinum thereby embracing the cracks and making them stronger and more beautiful.

If we apply this principle to the state of our Society, we can either sit around complaining about our broken bowl, of an aging population and too many roles and not enough people, or we can bring out our gold, silver or platinum and make our cracks stronger and more beautiful. We have the opportunity to completely imagine our Society anew. We have been able to trial and explore how technology can bring us together and address the tyrannies of money, carbon emissions and distance. Significant bequests have enabled us to be innovative and expansive in our pursuit of peace with justice. Our outward facing stance on the social issues that I believe are most important at the current time – action on the climate emergency and inclusion of gender diverse people - have the potential to see us speak to those previously on the margins of faith communities, to create real change, and to enable our community to thrive once again.

So, Friends, I put the question to all of you - how are we to break with the past and imagine our society anew, to paraphrase Arundati Roy? How might we envision our truly broken and tender community as one that is thriving, nourishing, open and connected? And how best might we hold it with love and ensure that the seeds will grow?

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July 2022

