

Summary of Epistles YM23

"World trends, challenges and hopes..."

Quaker Yearly Meetings write Epistles to other Quakers around their region and throughout the world to share a flavour of their labours and messages of Friendship. My name is Elizabeth PO' here in the ancient lands of the Whadjuk Noongar aboriginal peoples. My Quaker home is with Fremantle Meeting and I was asked to provide this summary.

Epistles are posted as they are received on the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) website from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, Middle East, and Oceania. Each one full of precious gleanings, 29 of them in the past year.

Some hold a thread of a story or even metaphor to guide their unfolding as a yearly gathering - the image of a tree, the way of a river, spiritual contents of a life-journey's backpack, often a bible quote.

What follows is my edited distillation of some of those 85 pages of epistles.

The first Yearly Meeting in the last year was Philadelphia', USA in late July 2022, with the theme, "We seek to repair broken foundations across the generations unified in our beloved Quaker community." Young adult Friend and performance artist Eppchez Yes in their keynote talk explored Quaker patterns of oppression, delay, and avoidance: "We are standing in the need of prayer, for the stakes are high." Shared corporate witness means addressing climate catastrophe and undoing racism doesn't lie with just two committees; instead it is the responsibility of each individual, taking acts of love and leaps of faith, in a Yearly Meeting of 10,000 strong scattered across the region in 100+ meeting communities.

Next we visit Lake Erie Yearly Meeting considered "Many Roots One Tree." Monthly meetings shared their "story trees" - short histories of how their meetings took root in local communities throughout Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania, about Friends who helped each meeting grow and how their roots of social justice and spiritual development have supported the new growth that hybrid worship and today's equity movements demand.

New England Yearly Meeting theme, “This is the Hour: How does the Spirit find you?” reflected a sense of urgency about the enormous challenges that all of the world’s people face at this time: dismantling Empire, and healing the immense damage that it has caused, leading to racial, economic, and social injustice and the destruction of the planet. “...we realized that seeking God’s guidance and practicing obedience to the divine will is hard work for us. Our sense of urgency often leads us to reenact the ways of Empire. Humble listening was our way through. “

In Canada, JoLee Sasakamoose gave the annual lecture: “Guided by Ancestors: Integrating Ojibwe Teachings with Quaker Testimony for Social Action”. Through personal stories both joyful and painful, they were presented with two different kinds of knowing, Quaker and Indigenous, that seemed to interweave and complement one another. “As CYM continues to work toward better relationships with the Indigenous Peoples whose home we now share, experiences like this one deepen our understanding and increase our ability to communicate.”

Travelling to Europe where Ireland had two Yearly Meetings this past year. 2022’s in Belfast, where a Young Irish Friend, Lynn Finnegan, gave the public lecture on *Embodying the Quaker Testimonies in Service of a Living Planet*, saying “If we can surrender ourselves to the way of Love, we are nearer to bringing the whole of our sustainability journey under the ordering of the Spirit.”

In Dublin, this year the public speaker, Harvey Gillman, reflected: “Hospitality is a form of testimony, an outward sign of an inward grace, where you offer the home you have found and welcome others in. Spiritual hospitality is an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. Our lives and that of the earth are fragile, and we must love and nurture each other.”

All Poland Gathering of Friends tell us of wonderful vegan meal and walk preceding an inspiring lecture and worship sharing. They saw spiritual life as a journey on which we take a backpack filled with certain beliefs - who decides what and how much to put in the backpack? What to take out of it? Do Quakers have a list of indispensable equipment?

Filled with joy of music-making they put together the Polish verse of the song ‘Every time I feel the Spirit’ for the World Gathering of Friends to be held in 2024 in South Africa.

France Yearly Meeting saw representatives from the Europe Middle East Section of FWCC, Quaker Council for European Affairs, Friends House Moscow, and Quaker United Nations Office give presentations, notably actions in response to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The epistle notes: “We are inspired by the Spirit-led actions of these different organizations. And our thoughts are with them and our Friends in Eastern Europe, who have

been agents of aid and peace during this time of conflict in Europe. The question foremost on our minds was, how can we continue following our peace testimony in times of war? “

The Quaker Council for European Affairs met to prepare their new Strategy document, considered under three headings of Migration and peace through a peacebuilding lens; Climate justice and peace through a peace lens; and Dialogue for transformation of complex problems only solved by a long slow process of providing safe spaces for listening to different viewpoints. They decided the three key issues in Europe to add a Quaker voice were: the right to conscientious objection; long-term work towards lasting peace in Ukraine ; and challenging the arms trade and increased militarisation.

Across to Japan, whose epistle shared: “Ever mindful of the suffering of people in war zones around the world, we continue to ponder what we can do to realize God’s peace on earth.” Their newly published *Quaker Handbook: An Ocean of Light that Covers the Darkness* is one solid response.

To Africa, Kenya’s Yearly Meeting in Lugari was their first gathering since three years of Covid with over three hundred (300) delegates, among them friends from Friends Church in Kenya, Friends United Meeting, FWCC Africa Section and other yearly meetings. Their theme derived from the Gospel of John 14:27 - “SEEK PEACE “

Uganda Friends Church 35th ‘annual conference’ shared many photos of their more than 100 delegates from various regions in Uganda & beyond. The theme was from Jeremiah 29:11[a], “For I know the plans I have For You.” The main speaker, Pastor Stephen Wamboka urged the congregants to “make a U-turn for the Lord to help us realise the good plans He has for us...” They heard spiritual & academic content from topics like Mental Health, Leadership & Church Development, Spiritual Gifts, Christian Giving, Resilience & Ministry, Quakers & Technology.

The last of the 29 epistles from the last year is from Northern YM 2023 in Wisconsin, USA. Their collective, shared discussion theme, with 180 people in attendance, was “Pruning Before Growth”. To make this metaphor real, workshop leaders brought a houseplant to the opening session and—to some gasps—pruned off a long tendril in order to plant it in a more spacious pot elsewhere, while making room for new growth to emerge. Their weekend’s agenda also pruned some traditional events and relocated them. Their big budget meeting and State of Society reports were done a week prior to Yearly Meeting, leaving more unstructured time during the Annual Gathering for happily splashing in the lake, playing some boardgames, and finding spontaneous conversations on the green. And this quote from their epistle: “...As we finish this round of pruning and preparing for new growth, NYM’s Nominating Committee’s efforts to fill committees drew our attention: We

need to more fully take back up efforts we paused during the height of the pandemic. As we collectively heal and re-emerge, we need to rebuild committees, institutional memory, and active engagement in the work we are called to—and need to do—as Friends.

These are the pots and this is the soil in which we found ourselves this weekend: we are pruned, some by intention, some by accident. We are gasping, sometimes, at the prospect of profound change. Quaking, even, as we grow.”

I recommend the happy exercise of spending time with world Quakers through their carefully sculpted letters addressed to us all.