

Yearly Meeting 2021 Epistle
9 July 2021

To Friends everywhere

Australian Friends send warm greetings as we meet in the southern winter for our second virtual Yearly Meeting from 3 to 9 July 2021. The pandemic has continued to affect the ways in which we create and experience community with the Spirit and one another, although with fewer impacts in Australia than in much of the world.

N’arweet Dr Carolyn Briggs, a Boon Wurrung senior elder, welcomed us to country and invited us to ‘come with a purpose to our beautiful home’. We meet during NAIDOC week, in which Australians celebrate the cultures of First Nations Peoples. Aunty Carolyn reminded us that this year’s theme for NAIDOC week is ‘Heal Country!’. And Australian Friends feel called to healing of many types—to heal country, heal community and heal the Earth—as we continue to live with the legacy of colonisation and racism, the ongoing disruption and separation caused by the pandemic, and the climate emergency.

Yet as we are called to do more with a sense of purpose, our Society has continued to age and the numbers of members and attenders to decrease. In the State of the Society report we were challenged to better illuminate the path to the meeting house door for seekers, and to work at the accessibility and inclusivity of our message. Whether Friends see the ‘glass’ as half-full or half-empty, we have much left in the bottle. We should continue to embrace the future with ‘steadfast fidelity to our guiding lights and not fearing opprobrium or reproach’.

Our ‘Friendly School’ included timely consideration of the place of Quakers in the world and how discernment leads to action, being to doing. This has been reflected in the amazing amount of activity by Quakers across Australia over the past year. Brisbane Friends helped to plan and implement action against an arms trade fair. We have continued to work to improve the ways that we protect children and adults in our meetings. The Asia West-Pacific Section of the Friends World Committee for Consultation has increased its efforts to contact isolated Friends throughout the area. Individual Friends continue to work with others for the cause of peace, for the repair of our environment and to reduce and buffer the serious impacts of the climate emergency, and for the relief of refugees. At the same time, we hear it is becoming more difficult to fill committee positions. We continue to feel the prompting to ask: is our committee work supporting us to be grounded in the worshipful waiting that leads to meaningful action in the world and brings us inwardly into the Light?

Uncertain times have also led to innovation. Our annual Backhouse Lecture took the form of a panel discussion for the first time, as five Friends reflected on the topic ‘Searching for Truth: Friends in a “post-truth” world’. The panellists spoke to Friends’ understanding of ‘Truth’ and our habitual discomfort with acknowledging differences as we seek to avoid conflict. Can we find a way to cultivate the capacity to live with difference? Is our love big enough to celebrate both our similarities and differences?

This was our second Yearly Meeting by Zoom and, by and large, our technical skills have improved. Finding the ‘sense of the meeting’ online has sometimes proven more challenging, although we have experienced some deep listening and discernment. We have reorganised our system of managing business so that we make as many decisions as possible closer to the local level. This has been a good

discipline for us. While we continue to lament that this is not the same as meeting face-to-face, we have made as much space as possible in our timetable for social contact.

We grieve to hear of the suffering and pain of many Friends around the world during the pandemic, including in your epistles and in the silent epistles of those who have been unable to meet. We send our love and sympathy and hold you all in the light.

We are being reminded of the things that matter, and there may be possibilities for spiritual 'deepening' arising from the challenges of the past two years whereby 'all the members of the spiritual body, the Church, might watch over and be helpful to each other in love'.