

State of the Society address, 2020

Friends, 2020 has been a difficult year. I wish to acknowledge that first—to acknowledge that many of us may hesitate to look back over the last twelve months for fear of the pain, the stress and the loneliness borne of isolation that it might bring to mind.

But we meet, in our first fully virtual Yearly Meeting, at a time when we may be able to see the way through to being in physical community with one another again. And though we now meet in a different way, we are moved to come together by the same spirit that has moved Friends throughout the centuries.

Caroline Stephen wrote in 1908:

‘If we are to have even a glimpse of the innermost and unspeakable joys of the spirit—if we are to rise above pain and sorrow and bitterness into the pure serenity of heaven within—if we are to “know that He is God”—we must be still... No clear impressions, either from above or from without, can be received by a mind turbid with excitement and agitated by a crowd of distractions. The stillness needed for the clear shining of light within is incompatible with hurry.’

The extremes of 2020 have made finding spiritual stillness difficult, even as we have been forced into times of greater physical stillness through “social distancing”. We have felt the continuing rising urgency for action on global heating pressing on us more and more. And we have seen, globally, the journey towards greater equality and dignity of all people begin to falter and feel less certain.

The State of the Religious Society of Friends in Australia in 2020 is, perhaps more than most years, a reflection of the state of society generally. The challenges of the world around us have directly and, in the case of the pandemic, suddenly affected the heart of the Quaker experience, meeting for worship.

And yet we have tried, through it all, to find that inward stillness that Caroline Stephen spoke of.

That which isn't said...

When I was asked to prepare the State of the Society address towards the end of 2019, I could not have foreseen what I'm sharing with you today. So much has happened since.

In reflecting on the State of the Religious Society of Friends in Australia today, I was asked to consider “how the truth is prospering” among us? This is a fairly ancient Quaker query. It's sometimes understood as the equivalent of simply asking “what's been happening lately?”. But that word “truth” is, for me, a call to deeper reflection. It goes to the very essence of who we are, and who we seek to be.

And it's a difficult question to answer. We are a busy Society. We have done much to seek to improve the world. We have stretched ourselves as thinly as our resources allow, and in some cases maybe even beyond that.

We have taken important steps towards supporting justice in the world through our support for the rights of refugees and First Nations peoples. We have joined the National Redress Scheme for those who experienced child sexual abuse.

We have been blessed to have Friends who could serve as able and responsible administrators of funds, properties, and in undertaking governance of the Society generally.

And yet the spiritual underpinnings of our actions are largely assumed in our reports. When it comes to speaking explicitly about the truth, we are surprisingly quiet. Very little appears in Documents in Advance about the inward spiritual lives of our meetings or individual Friends, although the religious and spiritual education activities undertaken by Regional Meetings, Silver Wattle and others hint at this inward depth. But we seem content, as a society, to leave the prospering of the truth to be inferred from our lives and actions.

I will therefore try to capture some of what has *not* been written and to tie this back to our actions as a Society where I can. But this brief address cannot be a comprehensive review of all that we have done since the last Yearly meeting.

Worship and spiritual community during a pandemic

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all Regional Meetings in Australia and meetings around the world have embarked on one of the biggest experiments in Quaker practice in our history. The last few months have not, of course, marked the first time that Quakers have held virtual meetings for worship. But over the past few months virtual meetings have moved beyond the early adopters among us to the Quaker mainstream.

We have adjusted to the new ways of interacting. Virtual meetings are different from meeting in person. It can be a strange experience at first sitting in Meeting for Worship with your own face looking back at you. It gives new meaning to that ancient Quaker practice of keeping watch against the motions of the self.

In virtual meetings, we see each other as reflections in a digital pond. Depending on our bandwidth and equipment, that reflection may be more or less clear. And we hear each other's voices as digital echoes. Quakers have long aspired to "hear beyond the words" to the underlying truth. In our virtual meetings we have needed to learn to see beyond the image to sense the true fellowship of a gathered meeting.

And yet many of us have done it. There has even been an unlooked-for benefit in this change. Technology has supported accessibility, both for Friends separated by large physical distances and for those who have benefited from being able to turn the volume up (or down!) and more clearly see the faces of everyone in the meeting than if they were sitting across a large room.

Many among us look forward to the return to face-to-face meetings. But if there is a gift to come out of this challenging time, it is that most of us now know from experience that it *is* possible to use new technologies to connect with one another in the spirit. This could be a significant event in the history of our community. We could consider, as a society, if and how we continue to support virtual participation in meeting for worship for those who want it after the pandemic.

Bushfires and the testimony to care for the Earth

Friends have sought to bear witness to care for the Earth for many years now. The summer of 2019/2020 made the effects of global heating directly and distressingly apparent to many of us. Vast areas of south-east Australia—its plant, animal and human residents—were devastated by a fire season that began unusually early, and which was very likely exacerbated by global heating.

Friends were directly affected by the fires, including those who lost homes and other property and those who bore the emotional burden of an enduring threat that such loss could occur at any time. Others of us lived with persistent smoke. In Canberra, despite the summer heat, we met for worship with windows and doors closed and air purifiers running due to having the worst air quality in the world for weeks on end. The Children and Junior Young Friends Summer Camp had to be moved to the home of Kyrstie Crane. No doubt many other plans were affected too.

At Yearly Meeting in 2019, we were led to as a society to resolve that “our plain words must communicate the catastrophe honestly and accurately, prompting both love and truth in our hearts”. A speaking plainly, there is a sense of despair among Friends in response to the lack of meaningful action by many in positions of global leadership. We feel this not only as members of the global society of humanity, but as a spiritual trial. The 2019 Quaker Earthcare Epistle on Climate Emergency & Species Extinction spoke of “a lament for the world as it has become”.

In January 2020 Ann Zubrick, the Presiding Clerk, responded to concerns about the bushfires expressed by Friends overseas by issuing a letter to Friends everywhere saying that ‘We grieve at what has been lost in these fires, and at our failures in the past to persuade successive governments to act directly on global heating, to divest and transition from fossil fuels, and to be responsive to creative solutions’. And after her experiences in the bushfires, Jenny Spinks wrote ‘It makes sense to cry and rage and to take action’.

As a society, we continue to face not only the challenge of seeking change in the world, but also of ministering to ourselves and others who seek hope and comfort.

The hope we can offer may simply be to know that we, and many others, are working for change. It may be a hope that the future will be better because of this work. And the Society’s commitment in our 2019 Earthcare Epistle to offering “bold companionship” to those who struggle personally with despair will likely be needed more and more.

And we have been active in Regional Meetings and individually to provide that hope, bold companionship and cheerful practicality. Regional Meetings reported that Friends felt a renewed desire to take action on the issue of climate change and noted that Earthcare is part of a long tradition of taking on big causes. One Meeting House now displays a large banner declaring that “There is no Planet B: Quakers urge action on our climate crisis”.

Regional Meetings also highlighted the support Friends provided by attending the School Strikes for Climate and spoke of their internal work to identify what further action could be taken by Friends individually and collectively. On this complex issue, Friends have also sought to draw on those with particular expertise, including within meetings.

Membership, attendance, and the broader Quaker movement

Membership is down slightly from 862 last year, to about 831 this year and members make up roughly 49% of the Society. The number of attenders has decreased from 732 to 709, making up 43% of the Society. There are 134 children of meetings down from 148 last year. Children of meetings make up 8% of the Society.

These numbers suggest that we are muddling through. They understate the number of new people involved with Quakers due to these being offset by others leaving the Society or passing away. Some Regional Meetings reported that individual meetings have had increases in attendance but, on the whole, we aren't increasing.

Friends in West Australian Regional Meeting noted, in particular, that they are a small and largely ageing Regional Meeting, with only small number of Friends contributing financially. Nonetheless, as is also the case in other Regional Meetings, Friends are “remarkably active” in several areas.

Many before have raised concerns about the decline in the number of Quakers. All sorts of things have been cited as causes, mostly centring on concerns that we have become too diffuse in our beliefs and too woolly in our language. But I would caution against efforts to turn the clock back—we could instead look to the future. The reports in Documents in Advance show that Friends today are remarkably united in the things that are eternal.

We may simply be part of a broader trend. The Religious Society of Friends is not alone in suffering declines in membership and participation. My sense is that it is a challenge for many membership-based organisations. The very model of societies of people who meet together on a regular basis, organise themselves through geographically based face-to-face committee meetings, and communicate among themselves primarily by newsletters, may be passing into history.

We live in an age of decentralised and multicentric movements and spontaneous organisation. The power of a person's voice is now, more than ever, determined by the relevance and timeliness of their message (for good or ill) rather than the backing of a formal group. To be heard today, a person has to speak quickly and from lived experience. Committees are good at many things, but they struggle to speak to people's hearts and minds. At their best, they provide support to the prophetic voices among us that can cut through. At their worst, they stifle such voices through risk aversion and delay.

George Fox, on top of Pendle Hill, had a vision of a great people to be gathered. Today we often hear that there are many Quakers out there who just don't know they're Quakers.

But do we recognise the difference between wanting to be a Quaker and wanting to be on a committee? Or even wanting to physically attend a meeting for worship at the same time every week? How do we speak to, engage with, and learn together with these seekers who could be part of a broader movement of Quakers in Australia, of which Yearly Meeting and Regional Meetings are just a part?

Initiatives such as Quaker Speak with 16,000 subscribers, and Quaker YouTuber Jessica Kellgren-Fozard whose video “Oh God... Let's Talk About My Religion // What Is Quakerism?” has had

385,000 views, may offer insights into new ways of engaging with those who could be Quakers inwardly, even if they don't (or can't) participate in traditional ways.

Quakers and privilege

I would also like to raise another issue, and on this I mostly have to rely on the anecdotal evidence rather than statistics. We have recently seen the Black Lives Matter movement come to the fore in tragic circumstances again in the United States, as well as in Australia. Quakers have tried for much (but not all) of our history to be advocates for racial equality and I would guess that many of us support the aims of those calling for equality right now.

And we have been working to achieve justice and equality in the wider world over the past twelve months. Our First Nations Peoples Concerns Committee has been working to support and amplify the voices of First Nations people themselves on the global stage. Victorian Friends have continued the silent vigil for justice for First Nations peoples until it was prevented by the pandemic. Friends have also worked to support refugees through individual actions and through Regional Meetings, Quaker Service Australia and the National Council of Churches in Australia. And the Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee has worked to highlight that draft 'religious freedom' opens the door to discrimination against vulnerable groups, including transgender people.

But it is equally true that the Religious Society of Friends in Australia does not, on the whole, reflect the diversity of the communities we live in. Quakers overwhelmingly embody many of the privileges in broader society. We're almost certainly more white, more formally educated, more middle class and more cisgender than the community around us. I say this not at all to diminish the contribution of any Friend who has found their spiritual home among Quakers in Australia; I say it to raise the question, where are the missing Friends?

As a Society, how can we answer that of God in everyone if we do not truly share in the lived experiences of *all* of our fellow human beings? Without such experience our advocacy on the issues facing our siblings, sisters and brothers around the world can seem like little more than detached and well-meaning intellectualism.

Whenever I think of privilege, I think of the story that says that George Fox told the aristocratic William Penn to "wear thy sword as long as thou canst". The sword was a physical symbol of privilege in the 17th Century. Today, I and many Friends continue to wear the invisible sword of privilege.

Quaker Bayard Rustin, a leader in both the civil rights and gay rights movements in the US, recognised in 1964 that privilege is not just about the humanity of those that lack it, but also those who have it:

'Jesus was not talking to the whole world when he said to a particular young man, your problem is money, and until you give it away you will find no peace. Take all thou hast, give it to the poor, and find your humanity again. He was telling him, get rid of power as you have exercised it because it stands in the way of your being a human being.'

Most Friends today would, I am sure, wish to cast away the sword of privilege. But it's not something that any of us can simply decide to take off and be done with it. The only way to lay down the sword of privilege is to abolish it.

Some may see an irony in me, a white, tertiary educated, middle class, cisgender man in stable employment, speaking to the issue of privilege. Due to the work of those before me, I have only experienced discrimination rarely and in its milder forms as a gay man, but otherwise embody a lot of privilege in contemporary Australian society.

Therefore, let me quote from American Friend, Vanessa Julye, who said in 2014 that:

'White supremacy is restricting our way of creating a blessed community because it is making it difficult for people of color to be a part of the community.'

'What I mean when I say white supremacy is white dominance, essentially. In this culture, what is considered "American" is really European-American culture. If you are a part of that culture and fit into that culture, you don't notice it and so things don't seem different for you...

'Once you are able to see some of the systems, then it becomes astonishing, and it is going to be hard, and it is going to be challenging, and there are going to be moments where its going to feel like, "I just can't do this. This is too hard. This is too overwhelming".'

'One of the benefits that the Religious Society of Friends has is the structure that we have support systems through support committees. If you are going to—either as a Meeting or as an individual—decide to start doing this work around identifying what white privilege and what white supremacy is... to have support as you're doing that.'

Vanessa Julye's language is forceful and direct, and I am thankful for it. Her comments are likely equally applicable to the state of the Religious Society of Friends in Australia.

The truth that Caroline Stephen wrote about—the truth that is embodied in Vanessa Julye's blessed community—is not and, indeed, cannot be restricted to a subset of humanity. The things that are eternal are directly relevant and immediately discoverable to all of us.

But could we hold in the light those ephemeral, human things about our Society that are *not* eternal but merely convenient or even unconscious? Could we hold them in the light to see whether the truth remains in them? Where we are lacking, are we prepared to change inwardly as a Society, as well as seeking to live out our testimony to equality in the world?

This would take a conscious decision and a spirit-led process. And we could seek help from Friends and friends from around the world who have already begun this work. Britain Yearly Meeting in 2019 focused on diversity and inclusion, and quoted a powerful minute by Junior Yearly Meeting in its epistle:

'We recognise the exclusion we may create is not intentional but it doesn't mean we aren't responsible for it. There is a feeling Quakers are passively inclusive. Our testimony to equality makes us complacent.'

Our collective endeavours to amend the world could only be strengthened by making a deep and conscious effort to amend our own Society.

How is the truth prospering?

Our actions as a Society over the last year reflect a continued commitment to letting the spirit guide us as we seek to bear witness to simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and care for the Earth. In the last twelve months we have faced increasingly trying circumstances and a greater urgency in living some of our testimonies.

We have also found unlooked-for gifts as technology has supported us to maintain our spiritual community through a time of social distancing. Quaker worship and practice have proven adaptable to sharing in the things that are eternal through the imperfect digital reflection of video conferencing. I feel only gratitude for each of us being there and supporting one another during this trying time. I hope you feel the same way.

'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.'