



## Yearly Meeting 2018 Epistle of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia

Yearly Meeting was held 7-14 July, 2018 at Avondale College, Cooranbong, New South Wales, on the lands of the Awabakal people. At this spacious, rural campus we benefitted from 120 years of the vision, work and prayers of the Seventh Day Adventist church. The generous catering of vegetarian food kept us sustained for work required at Yearly Meeting 2018. The buildings are linked by red-bricked curving paths, where crested pigeons pecked on the lawns under jacaranda trees.

We travelled by multiple forms of transport for long distances, over many days to get here; the Queenslanders in thick coats, scarves and colourful beanies and the Tasmanians in cotton shirts.

Friends graciously released our Presiding Clerk, Jo Jordan, to be with her suddenly seriously ill husband and appointed new Clerks to ensure the orderly working of our business.

'The State of Society' address summarised activities and posed questions around five words: Community (the positives and the difficulties), Prophecy (what we say), Witness (what we do), Evangelism (sharing our faith) and Condition (our spiritual state).

Each day was grounded in worship together. An early morning Meeting for Worship or Bible reading and sharing group was offered daily before breakfast to help prepare people for the day. We held a Meeting for Remembrance in gratitude for Friends who have passed this year and we were reminded that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, including our own family ancestors and Quaker forebears.

The Winter School theme was 'Turning Points' which we explored in poetry, writing, art, circle dancing, life stories, empowerment and advocacy training, in a day retreat based on George Fox's "condition", or on 'optimal decision making'. Junior Young Friends (JYFs) went to a permaculture farm where they participated in service as well as learning about Permaculture Principles.

In this time of turning, of the need for transformation of our Society, we note our ageing membership, the small number of children, and the vigorous group of JYFs. We heard from Young Friends about how distances lead to isolation and how the current AYM structures are not optimal for their participation. Technology enables us to communicate more easily over vast distances. We celebrate the new AYM website and proliferation of online Meeting for Worship and committee meetings.

We delighted in hearing an overview of Epistles from places as diverse as Belgium, Uganda, Alaska, Young Friends of Northern Ireland and many more. Community was the most common theme. We well understood their joy of being together but also their anguish about the state of the world: the suffering, inequality, dispossession, dislocation of so many people; also, the inspiring work in peace and non-violence which gives us great hope.

In the Backhouse lecture, *An Encounter between Quaker Mysticism and Taoism in Everyday Life*, Cho-Nyon Kim spoke to us mindfully of learning to be a Quaker. Through the teachings of Ham Sok Hon he found that Quakerism resonates with Korean cultural and religious traditions of Taoism, Confucianism and

Buddhism. He stressed living his religion in daily life, following a way of simplicity and discipline, balancing faith and practice. We can feel growing connections with the spirituality of our Asian neighbours. We were ready for this message.

Quaker Service Australia (QSA) supports a wide range of projects in Africa, India, East and S E Asia, including planting of traditional crops, seed saving and permaculture gardening to build local food security, even in refugee camps. QSA is deeply engaged in funding Australia-wide projects to assist refugees.

Many members and Meetings are engaging more deeply with their local First Peoples and their spirituality. We know this must continue for deep two-way interactions and healing to happen. Speakers generally acknowledged the Aboriginal land on which they live.

Australia Yearly Meeting strongly supports the 'Uluru Statement from The Heart', arising from the gathering of Aboriginal representatives in May, 2017. This seeks constitutional reform for a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution, and a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history. A letter will be sent to the Australian Prime Minister from this Yearly Meeting strongly urging the Government to move into this process with haste.

We are alarmed that the Australian Government has announced a policy of subsidising increased weapons exports. We are dismayed by the ever-escalating amounts of money Australia puts towards armaments and the war machine, including insidious funding of our underfunded universities by arms manufacturers. Alongside this, budgets for foreign aid, refugees and care for our own citizens shrink.

However, we were uplifted and awed by the Quaker practice that is present in so much work for peace and earth care in Australia, and Asia. This includes Quaker training in empowerment advocacy, sixteen watching briefs to inform us and assist lobbying, Alternatives to Violence Project and Friends' Peace Teams which grow in significance. We welcomed the publication of *From Fear to Hope – Alternative Narratives on War and Peacemaking*, by Pamela Leach and pamphlets regarding disappearing Palestine for distribution in our meetings. Peacemaking and earth care are closely inter-connected and we encourage Friends to make faithful choices for a flourishing world.

There has been diligent work to revise our *Handbook of Practice and Procedure in Australia* to bring our practices and language up to date.

Twenty panels of the Australian Quaker Narrative Embroidery project graced the College Church Foyer. More were being lovingly stitched during Yearly Meeting. An illustrated book of the project to tell stories of Australian Quaker history - *Australian Quaker Narrative Embroidery: Friends in Stitches* - was launched. We celebrated this work and the outreach opportunities taken up to date and continuously beckoning. We wrestle with our portrayal of Aboriginal history since European invasion.

There was a sense of tenderness and an ability to hold differences without rancour as we dealt with some contentious issues. Friends responded to the Yearly Meeting's request for their service. The Spirit is moving within the Yearly Meeting to help us handle difficult decisions and an increased work load.

*YM18 Epistle Committee*

David Johnson

Christine Larkin

Melissa Nininahazwe

Sally O'Wheel

1. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-10/makarrata-explainer-yolngu-word-more-than-synonym-for-treaty/8790452>