

Religious Society of Friends

Religieus Genootschap der Vrienden

Société Religieuse des Amis

Religiöse Gesellschaft der Freunde

Quakers in Belgium and Luxembourg

Epistle Yearly Meeting 10-13 May – Maldegem, Belgium

To Friends everywhere,

"Sit up and take notice. There's no time to waste, when there's spiritual work to be done!"

This was the command of a shaman from Papua New Guinea, that our guest speaker, Alastair McIntosh, shared with us during his talk on developing community and nurturing seedlings, using the example of his involvement in the land reform movement on the island of Eigg, in the Inner Hebrides, Scotland. Against considerable odds, the whole island community purchased Eigg when it came on to the market in the 1990s. Alastair shared the experiences that the islanders faced in their quest to reclaim their land and heritage and build community.

Alastair's presentation inspired three days of intensive discussions about the future direction of our Quaker community in Belgium and Luxembourg. Ours has traditionally been a relatively small meeting, with a majority of members and attenders coming from outside Belgium. We recognize the important role eldership and oversight play in the life of any meeting. However, recently we have struggled to fill vacancies for these roles. Our three-day residential meeting has given us the time and space to explore the roots of the issue as well as to seek clarity on the way forward, to develop our knowledge and understanding of each other and to enjoy being together. We made considerable progress during this meeting and we also made concrete plans for the rest of the process.

We took the time to reflect on the specific nature of our meeting, recognizing that different people come to us with different needs and expectations, which also vary over time. We seek a harmonious balance between providing a place that is hospitable to the soul, a space where we can just *be*, and acknowledging the responsibilities that come with being part of a community. We are all responsible for the welfare of each other and of the Meeting.

At the same time, we are encouraged to note a growth in interest in the Quaker way that has led to the setting up of a new worship group in the city of Ghent. We feel both humbled and heartened by these developments, which bring with them new challenges in learning from and supporting each other, including better reflecting the linguistic diversity of our community.

We are called to provide a richer soil in which the seedlings of our gifts, our fellowship with each other and our witness to Quaker values can flourish.

In and on behalf of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting

Ruth Harland, Clerk

Phil Gaskell, Assistant Clerk