

To Friends Everywhere

Our 200th anniversary was celebrated at our Yearly Meeting gathering in Stavanger, Norway, at the beautiful Solborg (Sun's Dwelling) Folk High School from 9th-12th August, 2018. Norwegian Friends have cause for celebration; we are a small, but active Society. We may be numerically small, but through the years we have gained influence in important areas of society to a greater extent than any other denomination – at least by membership, as the Christian Council of Norway said in their address.

A group of people of many ages, from one year to more than ninety, was gathered. We are proud to have amongst us active children and a “wonderful” youth group, as one of their leaders so pertinently described them. The young people, altogether twelve young Friends between 12 and 18, were divided into three groups. The youngest group “graduated” from children to youth this year, and the other groups provided information to the youngest about their activities. The middle group was responsible for arranging a Meeting for Worship on the Friday night, in which one of them wished to confirm her membership in the Society of Friends. On the Saturday, all the youth groups took part in an exploration of Light in Nature. The young people enjoyed being part of the fellowship across groups and throughout the gathering.

Regardless of age, we have all been grateful to be together and to enjoy the warmth of fellowship. We have experienced deep and nurturing silence during worship, and also play, joy and fun. Play is a way to get to know oneself and gain self-respect and respect for others.

This year we have enjoyed a long and warm summer. At the same time we are deeply concerned about climate change. We believe in that of God in everyone, not only in humans but also in nature. We do not own the world! We will continue to work to maintain diversity, look after the environment and each other. Our concern for nature and the environment was expressed through different contributions and expressions right from the start. As our Clerk said in her introduction, “The Kingdom of God is within us and also in the trees, the stones and in the air around us. And our task is to take care of it.” In a poem about mountains, Kari Steensberg once said it thus, “Here, up high, where everything is close, one may hear the voice of goodness, a song of praise for life and for the people whom we love.”

Through Hans Eirik Aarek's vivid stories from the history of Quakers in Norway, our pride was strengthened: we belong to a religious society that has stood for and struggled for important values. Ben Pink Dandelion challenged our vision of the future. How do we intend to care for our Society, its fundamental values and our faith? How will we handle new trends and contemporary demands; how will we live up to our own wish for living simply, being radical, and welcoming new development in our Society without losing the values which we want to safeguard?

The themes from the introductions were re-examined in light of our yearly meeting theme, “A Meeting in the process of change”, and in smaller groups and plenary worship sharing. Many were concerned to build bridges between the inner and the outer, between tradition and renewal. The advice given by Wilhelm Aarek to a young Friend many years ago may serve as a summary of our conversation, “Be open – with substance.”

We will be open to care for all the new flowers, colours and diversity without letting go of the nucleus of our faith, That of God in Everyone. The Light is within us. This is the basis of everything we do. «Feel your faith», as Ben said in his talk.

We have been reminded to value our Quaker traditions but to take care that they do not become empty forms. How may we continue the insight of Early Friends? As Quakers we sometimes need to leave our comfort zone and be a bit stubborn. Friction may be needed to create that spark which may lead to change. The Quaker faith and the testimonies are both simple and radical, but need to be tuned to our own time.

Several concrete examples were mentioned of renewal within the Quaker Society. We need to give priority to the needs of young people, and to use simple and clear language without too many codes to crack. We should be open to renewing our form of worship. We need to welcome people who come to our meetings for worship with interest and positive curiosity, and to care for one another.

A worshipful silence remained through the whole gathering; there were periods of nourishing silence and vocal ministry. We were reminded of Søren Kierkegaard who said that “prayer entails becoming silent and waiting until God may be heard”. In the silence we experienced the light from God.

Stavanger, 12. dag i 8. måned, 2018

Hanne Hognestad