

Epistle of the Yearly Meeting of Aotearoa New Zealand, Te Hāhi Tūhauwiri
held at the Quaker Settlement, Whanganui, and online, 18th - 22nd May, 2023

Greetings in love and peace to Friends everywhere.

In Whanganui, in the peaceful setting of the Quaker Settlement, 61 Quakers gathered, and were joined by 33 online. After a purely online Meeting last year, we found joy in building community within this blended structure.

The purpose and process of Yearly Meeting formed the focus of a preparatory day. Guided by our revised Quaker Handbook, we considered listening to one another in depth, seeking a Spirit-led way forward embodying the gifts and experiences of all, and being ready to be surprised by the unity which emerged. The book's guidance on careful adherence to Quaker process led us forward into our opening discernment session. The benefits of our preparation time fed the spirit of Yearly Meeting.

Linked online with Friends up and down the country including groups from several Meetings, our all-age worship on Sunday provided a time of tranquillity. Within our theme of unity with the natural world, we heard readings and other spoken ministry, and enjoyed the creative art work and greetings from the children.

In harmony with our sense of place, a local Friend, Keith Beautrais, opened Yearly Meeting with a greeting recognising our involvement with and dependence on Papatūānuku (earth), Ranginui (sky) and Tangaroa (ocean), under the care of divine power. We recognised the mana (authority) of the tangata whenua (people of the land), especially Ngaa Rauru and Tūpoho, the Māori people of this area. Later Keith provided an inspiring view of the incorporation of indigenous wisdom in the management of Te Awa Tupua, the local Whanganui River, following the extensive destruction of the area by colonial exploitation. In 2017 the River was given legal status as a person (a world precedent), and Māori were recognised as 'people of the river'. All involved remembered and honoured the elders who had engaged in a century-long struggle. We were impressed that young people were actively involved in environmental restoration. We need to draw on all our strength to give our young people hope.

Throughout our time of discernment in a spirit of worship, we sought to listen to one another with love and tenderness, and to be aware of the consequences of our decisions. Periods of silent worship offered fresh depth. Topics which stirred emotion, and which called for centred listening, were the future of our national residential and study centre (the Settlement) and the vulnerability of relationships of trust and care between us.

We also sought for faithful leadings as we considered our ongoing peace and service witness, and topics related to administration. These included the balance between our expenditure and our reserves and the ways in which our website can be enabled to support our spiritual and community life.

The Rainbow Quakers, now a Yearly Meeting group, read to us a statement of commitment and inclusion, *Walking in the Light under the Rainbow*. The statement

has arisen from fresh awareness of those in our country and worldwide who differ from conventional expectations of gender and sexual orientation. After months of development and discernment between a drafting group and our Monthly Meetings, our Yearly Meeting has adopted the final text. In emerging from this session, we were greeted by a double rainbow in the sky overhead.

Acknowledging the value of our young people deepening their Quaker experience, we agreed to support representatives, including Young Friends under 35 years of age, to the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) global plenary, to take place in South Africa in 2024.

We welcomed our FWCC visitors, Marj Angalot (Bohol Worship Group, Philippines), Abhay Wilson (Bhopal Yearly Meeting, India, speaking online), Ann Zubrick (Australia Yearly Meeting) and Adrian Glamorgan (Secretary, FWCC Asia West Pacific Section, also online). We learnt of the interweaving of Friends in our Section in mutual friendship and support, and of the multiple ways in which Friends witness to our testimonies. We heard how Meetings and small groups in Asia engage in relief and reconstruction work, faithfully uphold their worship inheritance, and how deeply they value links with other Friends. We have been invited to balance grief and gratitude as we work for a future with hope.

Treasuring our connection with Friends worldwide, we recall the words of Philadelphia Friends in 1683:

Oh, remember us, for we cannot forget you:
Many waters cannot quench our love,
Nor distance wear out the deep remembrance
Of you in the heavenly Truth.

In peace and friendship,

Anne & Alistair Hall

Yearly Meeting Co-Clerks