



Epistle of the Yearly Meeting 2022 of The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia

Greetings to Friends everywhere.

Australian Friends gather during the southern winter chill for our third virtual Yearly Meeting, 2-10 July 2022. Ljudan Michaelis-Thorpe acknowledged the various Aboriginal lands on which we gather, reminding us that Indigenous knowledge is needed more than ever to heal both the planet and its people, especially as we face climate crises. She invited Friends to join with Indigenous peoples through an intertwined space of shared knowledge, adaptability and collective energy, bringing all of creation into balance.

In delivering the State of Society address Aletia Dundas asked challenging questions: what is holding us back from our radical roots; where is the evidence of the Truth moving amongst us; is our endless busyness keeping us from knowing one another in the Spirit? We were invited to use the Friendly notions of 'broken and tender' to reimagine our Society's structures to enable us to be more open to the moving of the Spirit in pursuit of peace, embracing of gender diversity and responses to climate emergencies. Within these challenges lies the hope to hold our faith community in love and tenderness, hold the oceans of Darkness and Light in balance, so nourishing seeds can grow and we can thrive.

Friends explored the theme for Friendly School, 'Caring for Humanity in Interesting Times', through many forms including labyrinths, creative writing, games, poetry, artistic expression, song, and exploring Indigenous language concepts. The opportunity for the latter to broaden our understanding will help to decolonise our thinking and attitudes. Our Society will be all the richer for it.

The array of Share & Tells and dedicated sessions this year expanded the theme already laid down. They demonstrated the depth and breadth of our concerns and Quaker testimonies in action and our collaborative links with others. We revisited the spiritual underpinnings of early Friends that guide everything we do. Revisions to the Handbook of Quaker Practice and Procedure in Australia, the future of a Yearly Meeting office and the effective use of IT focused our attention on matters of the world. We're asked to reflect on the right ordering of Friends as an institution and Friends as a community of seekers.

The Summary of Epistles from Yearly Meetings around the world reflected our shared faith and Quaker practices throughout the world. We heard similar yearnings for world peace and harmony, we felt a collective agonising over the destructive changes to our climate and species extinction: a simultaneous sense of suffering and solidarity from which we must not step away.

Our Formal Business Sessions at times traversed difficult terrain. Conducting them in a virtual environment brought an added layer of complexity and challenge. Our Quaker processes held us in good stead all the same. We were encouraged to have longer periods of silence, waiting, and listening ever more deeply 'for that of God to speak', especially when unity evaded us. This is the touchstone of our faith which brings us together to surrender to the still, small voice within our community.

We were heartened to hear from the Friends World Committee for Consultation about Quaker efforts around the world. It is timely to be reminded that we are part of a much bigger movement and network of Friends, sharing and supporting one another in Spirit-led work.

'Let me tell you some stories, listen deeply to hear your Truth'. Yarrow Goodley's Backhouse Lecture, 'Creating hope: working for justice in catastrophic times' did not mince words describing the current climate crisis and its disproportionate impact on people who are not privileged by the lightness of their skin. They shared experiences of deep despair for our planet. Hearing the journey of others has enabled Yarrow to discover seeds of hope which break the barriers of pain, enabling a vision for a compassionate and just future to grow. We heard imagined stories of people living in such future societies and are challenged to live radically, be collectively bold and see with the eyes of others.

To bridge the gap between virtual and residential participation, daily home groups on line and pods in situ were successfully introduced alongside our usual coffee chats and social gatherings in the evenings after Epilogue. We ask how to bring families, young people and children into the heart of Australia Yearly Meeting, and not just at our annual gathering. We miss the regular sound of children's laughter, discussions with teens and sharing with families. Even though there were fewer numbers, it was a valuable time for making new friends, building relationships and sharing experiences.

Two Yearly Meetings statements, one on peace and the other on climate emergency, as well as enthusiastic support for an integrity in public office project, were outcomes of the gathering and will publicly confirm Friends' commitment to this work. Looking forward, we shared ideas about a possible Quaker Life Network and how it might nurture our communities.

This Yearly Meeting in particular created an opportunity to broaden our notions of mutuality, identity and relationships, and question our entrenched binary thinking and attitudes. All these rich offerings provided avenues to wrestle with the challenges of how to live integrally and adventurously in a world in deep crisis. We are urged to 'consider the world as an en-Spirited whole, to accept no boundary to repairing and sustaining the Earth for the future, and to appreciate more deeply the creative energy in all living things and life processes' - all the while being truthful, hopeful and faithful Friends.

Australia Yearly Meeting

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