

## **Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Germany and Austria**

### **Epistle**

Bad Pyrmont, 16 Oct, 2021

"In the world you have tribulation ... (John 16:33)." Like a magnifying glass, the Corona pandemic has brought our uncertainties sharply into focus, while major concerns like injustice, global warming and the nuclear threat have been upstaged. We yearn for unity on our Quaker path with Friends worldwide, to whom we extend our warm greetings. Our 91<sup>st</sup> Yearly Meeting took place under hygiene guidelines we had repeatedly wrestled with in order to make it possible for everyone to participate. Indeed, around 100 of us took part, including a handful of delegates from other yearly meetings, some in the Pyrmont Quaker House (all tested), some alone or in groups in front of connected cameras and screens. We missed the physical presence of our children and youth groups, but they still had their own small programme. In addition, a large group of under 18-year olds had gathered in Benkendorf to share the days immediately preceding the annual meeting.

"Friends on the move – shaping a shared future!" was the motto of our gathering.

How can we make a difference as individuals and as a community in the face of all threats, how can we limit their influence, and how can we stand alongside those who are most affected? Many of us are grateful to be able to join local initiatives such as the vigils for nuclear disarmament in Büchel, or actions to protect livelihoods from strip mining in Lützerath. We want to overcome relationship issues and put aside our personal sensitivities and open ourselves trustingly to new forms of organisation aimed at increasing sharing and community.

Our inner attitude of awareness and respect with regard to all ways and forms of life can reach out to and inspire those around us. In the course of the Yearly Meeting we listened to many a personal witness from the lives of Friends. This enabled us to take heart and gain in confidence.

In this year's Richard Cary-Lecture „Genesis continues,“ Stefan Mann showed us through his own life experiences and drawing on political events, that our actions, even as individuals, may have an impact. By taking small steps, having the courage to contradict and to offer ones own ideas, all of us can contribute to a positive development. He argued that the abolition of factory farming in the 21st century may turn out to be equivalent to the abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While many issues remain unresolved, it is encouraging that "our quakerly values - from peace to equality - provide the right tools for us to stand up not just for small improvements, but also for major change" (Stefan Mann). Speaking out of the silence after the lecture, we understood that we are in the process of an empathetic conversation with each other regarding our dealings with co-creatures. In spite of a sense of our own imperfections, we may nevertheless sow the first seeds, some of which may germinate only later and - combined with the efforts of others - allow us to see the broader picture.

Based on an initiative within the Protestant Church of Baden, Ralf Becker presented us with a scenario for a purely civil German security policy. The proposal includes a design for fair external economic relations, civil peace building to replace military interventions, and strengthening democratic values. The insight that violence always breeds further violence, is now even shared by former proponents of military operations. Co-operation and peace can only have lasting success if we „lay down our arms,“ and are willing to trust others with our

vulnerabilities. The German Yearly Meeting will join the support group of the "[Sicherheit neu Denken](#)" (Re-thinking Security) initiative. We intend to offer an active and critical support of this initiative.

We had asked a coordinating group of Friends to establish a participatory concept to protect our children and youth in Quaker events from sexualised violence. The process of developing the protective guidelines is in itself part of the prevention: we want to hold the unspeakable in the Light and take joint responsibility for our social interactions, free from abuse of power and from violence. In the coming year, the concept will be presented and reviewed in our regional meetings.

We continue to engage with the future of our Quaker House, with regard to which we had clarified some different possibilities for its maintenance and use. Following last year's decision to preserve this historical building with its literally "moving" history, the Committee of Clerks and the working group „Quaker House Future" presented concepts corresponding to the different possibilities. We will now commission a preliminary plan, with a view to redesigning the building to be used more flexibly, while staying within our means.

After one of our meetings for worship, a Friend shared an experience she had had in the early hours of that day: she was heading towards the Quaker House, which is on a slope. Downhill she saw fog and a gloomy atmosphere, uphill warming sun rays and clarity. She compared this situation with our spiritual lives as Friends: we see the dark and gloomy, yet we turn toward the Light and let it guide us.

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