

CANBERRA REGIONAL MEETING

This report highlights the particular areas of energy and focus since the last Yearly Meeting. It has been a time of significant challenges and opportunities for Friends in our region.

Climate and Earthcare

Our Meeting has been active in pressing for greater action by Friends in response to the climate emergency. The YM Earthcare Epistle in July 2019 arose partly from a deep concern among our members that the business of YM 2019 could not be held without reflecting on our shared commitment to acknowledging the human impact on the planet, and on accepting greater responsibility for healing and recovery. In this we are supporting the wider responses of many (especially younger) people in our world.

Following YM 2019, a working group was established in CRM to identify further action by individuals and collectively. As a result, Friends have actively supported public events (such as the School Strike in September 2019 and the People's Climate Assembly at Parliament House in February 2020). The Turner Meeting House has been used for nonviolence work by Extinction Rebellion, and we have held Friends Fridays to hear from experts such as Andrew Glikson, a climate scientist member, and to map out ways forward with this concern. In November 2019 the Meeting supported (financially, organisationally and in participation) the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC) conference *Faith in Action: A religious response to the climate emergency* held at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra.

The serious bushfires that threatened many parts of our region (and beyond) in summer led to sharing of stories from those affected most directly (especially on the NSW south coast). We sought practical ways to help, through offering temporary accommodation, publicising news from Friends in difficulty, and collecting funds for wildlife preservation.

National Redress Scheme

When the Yearly Meeting officers drew attention to the importance of this Scheme in responding to people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse, we were asked to become part of a national Quaker response in applying to join the NRS. We held special meetings to be clearer about the implications of joining and decided to go ahead in faith. We recognised that discussion of this topic could raise painful memories for some Friends, and we offered pastoral support if needed. In a statement to Standing Committee, we made clear our view that, if not using the policies of child protection and safe Quaker community already adopted by AYM, claimants should be able to use the NRS as a legitimate avenue. We have appointed two Friends as contact people for the scheme and are part of the discussions within AYM about how best to share responsibility for providing relevant information and meeting any payments for redress under the Scheme.

Structures of CRM

Throughout the year we have spent considerable time and effort reviewing our Meeting structures with a view to making them more participatory and effective. With the help of a working group, we have held conversations about our priorities as a Meeting, reducing the number of committees, ways of using volunteers rather than appointees for some of our work, and about dividing our business more clearly between regional and local matters. This has been a difficult process, with so many different perspectives on what is most important to us in our commitment to the Society of Friends. We will be ‘hastening slowly’ as we consider the changes that will help us.

One outcome of our exploration has been a decision to amend the Rules of the Incorporated Association to specify more clearly the range of groups covered by our Regional Meeting, and the objects and powers involved. We have considered the name of the Association and the value of making it more inclusive of the groups we represent. As a result we have decided that, for use within the Society, we would like to be known as “Southern NSW and ACT Regional Meeting” (SONARM). In due course this may lead to a change in the formal name of the Association. We will continue to seek ways to include Friends from outside Canberra, and over the longer term may conduct some business meetings in their areas.

Hosting YM 2020

We have been through a significant process of discernment around the choice of a venue for our hosting of YM 2020 gathering in July. After initially deciding on Greenhills Conference Centre near Canberra, we discovered a number of problems around the range of accommodation and facilities offered. We then approached Avondale College (near Newcastle NSW) where two previous gathering have been held (most recently in 2018), and recommended to AYM that it become the venue, with CRM as host and drawing on assistance from Friends elsewhere. An active committee has been working on the arrangements and has appreciated the help of Friends from other Regional Meetings. The impact of the global coronavirus (Covid-19) has meant a complete review of YM 2020. The hosting group recommended (and Standing Committee agreed) to cancel the physical gathering, and to explore alternative (on-line) ways to handle the different elements of Yearly Meeting occasions.

COVID-19 Health Crisis

CRM’s response to Covid-19 has been very fast. We missed only one week of Meeting for Worship in the Turner Meeting House before shifting to an online weekly Meeting for Worship. Bega Valley Recognised Meeting has also moved to online Meetings for Worship at their usual time. Within our region, we have had to cancel many of our regular face-to-face Quaker activities including meetings for worship and other gatherings. In place of those, we have worked on offering online arrangements to help Friends keep in touch, and we have an ongoing group seeking creative ways to maintain and build our community during this extended period of change. At the time of writing, we have successfully held our normal April Meeting for Worship for Business through online means.

Our Quaker Communities

What follows is an outline of the activities of our groups until mid-March, after which the health crisis led to those activities being stopped or severely curtailed. At the time of writing this report, no Quaker face-to-face Meetings for Worship are being held in our region and Friends are seeking alternative ways of connecting.

Canberra Regional Meeting encompasses several worship meetings: North Canberra Meeting, Recognised Meetings in Bega Valley and Wagga Wagga, and Worshipping Groups in south Canberra, Goulburn, Bateman's Bay and at the Silver Wattle Quaker Centre. The frequency of Meetings for Worship ranges from daily at Silver Wattle (when Quakers are in session) to monthly in Goulburn. There is also a mid-week meeting in Turner on Wednesday mornings. Children's Meetings are held monthly at the FMH in Canberra and also in Goulburn. Communication is assisted through the weekly E-Notices and an occasional newsletter. There is also a well-maintained website which is linked with the national Quaker website. The annual residential weekend, held in recent years at Silver Wattle Quaker Centre near Bungendore, has been a valuable opportunity for Friends from different groups to meet and share. It has become an annual event for CRM to celebrate World Quaker Day in October and have ongoing appreciation of our connection with Quakers around the world.

Bega Valley Recognised Meeting holds meetings for worship every second and last Sunday each month at Mumbulla School with an average attendance of 8-9 F/friends. It has committees for Ministry and Oversight, Nominations and Hospitality, and hosts the AYM Peace and Social Justice Fund Committee. There is an ongoing spiritual nurture group, and there have been six Quaker Learning sessions during the year. A visit was arranged for David Nyuol Vincent (South Sudanese refugee and peace worker) to speak in Bega as well as meeting local social justice advocates and visiting two schools.

Wagga Wagga Recognised Meeting continues to meet for worship on the first and third Sundays each month in the Bridge Drop In Centre at the Uniting Church. The average attendance is five. The death of Robin Lindsay in June was a significant loss, as he had been part of the meeting for so long. During July there was a large gathering of over 100 people to hear visiting Quakers Lady Borton and Rowe Morrow. Friends continue to be active in ecumenical and interfaith concerns and events. On World Quaker Day in October, there was a discussion on the FWCC Kabarak call for peace and ecojustice, and this theme was continued in later discussion during the year. Other after-Meeting discussions have covered 'this we can say' and podcasts on Quaker testimonies. Sally Kingsland from Canberra ran a well-attended workshop on 'knowing each other in the things that are eternal'. Several Wagga Friends helped organise the CRM residential weekend at Silver Wattle Quaker Centre in November 2019.

North Canberra Meeting holds weekly Sunday meetings for worship at the Meeting House in Turner. Attendance at the 10am meeting varies from 30 to 50 during the year, and at the 9.15am meeting around 10. There is an opportunity after the 10am MfW for 'afterthoughts' on those Sundays not involving a business meeting. Apart from CRM hosting the Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee, the Meeting arranges periodic Friends Fridays that include a shared meal and a theme, and after-worship discussions on some Sundays. We held a 'threshing' meeting soon after the 2019 federal election to allow Friends to speak about their feelings about the outcome of the election, and to hear each other's responses in moving beyond the negative reactions.

There has been a series of 'Quaker Samplers' led by the Ministry Committee on different aspects of Quakerism. On other occasions, speakers have included Lady Borton and Rowe Morrow on behalf of the FWCC's Asia West Pacific Section, Helen Vale (Namibia), David Nyuol Vincent on refugees from South Sudan, Venerable Dambara (Sri Lankan Buddhist), Coptic priests from the National Council of Churches, Andrew Glikson (climate change), David Purnell (freedom of speech and religious discrimination), and Helen Moran (Sharing Aboriginal Stories). Regular monthly collections are held for charities and other causes of importance to Friends. The matter of efficient heating and cooling of the Turner building has exercised considerable attention during the year and has led to decisions to improve insulation and use of technology to assist in making the venue as comfortable and environmentally responsible as possible.

David Purnell and Lorraine Thomson, Co-Clerks

April 2020