

Epistle from Australia Yearly Meeting 2024

From July 6th to 13th 2024 we gathered at West Beach, a suburb of Adelaide on Saint Vincent's Gulf, South Australia. We send greetings to Friends everywhere. We meet on Kurna land beside the white sands of Holdfast Bay, the eroding sand dunes held together by native plantings.

This was a hybrid meeting. We were able to gather together in-person in large numbers for the first time since 2019, to hug one another, to share a meal, sit talking across the table into the night. Friends came from all parts of Australia and beyond via car, train, plane, bicycle (perhaps) and ferry to be here, under the flight path of Adelaide Airport. Our technological skills have developed over the COVID-19 years and we are now able to include on-line Friends almost seamlessly with occasional blips.

The meeting was opened in Kurna language by the Kurna Elder, Uncle Rodney Midlah O'Brien who had to leave early to attend a NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) ceremony.

A wide variety of Friendly Schools was offered, some creative, some pacifist, some environmental, some spiritual. These themes were followed up by Share & Tell sessions. Some of these looked at nurturing our Society.

We heard in Bev Polzin's State of Society Address that even as we acknowledge the ageing of our members and the difficulties of filling roles, we rejoice that our use of technology has played a part in connecting each other across our big country. Isolated Meetings and Friends are brought into the centre. We express UBUNTU. 'I am because you are.' Following the disruptions of the pandemic we rebuild our community and grow from the challenges of COVID-19.

The theme of Australian Yearly Meeting 2024 is *Quakers in times of conflict and change*. We live in an 'Ocean of Darkness'. War and environmental catastrophe beset our world on every side. We were awestruck to learn how Friends are finding that Infinite Ocean of Light and Love within and are led to varied involvements in groups such as Friends Peace Teams, Raising Peace, World beyond War, Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), to name a few. We understand the importance of building partnerships and ultimately mass movements because we know we are a small Society and we cannot do it alone. We welcomed the newly employed Peacemaker, Jessica Morrison. The QPLC prepared a public statement focused on the following: First Nations' peoples, the climate emergency, Palestine/Israel, integrity, militarism and nuclear weapons.

The Australian Yearly Meeting endorsed The Climate Emergency and Species Extinction Working Group's travel guide and action plan. The CESEWG was established in 2021 for a two year term, later extended for another year. A new committee will be formed called 'Quakers Australia Earth Witness and Action Committee'. As the working group completes its task, they ask how the Regional Meetings and individual Friends will proceed with the implementation of this plan to reach wider society. This is the beginning, not the end, of this urgent work.

The 2024 Backhouse Lecture was presented on the birthday of James Backhouse by Jackie Leach-Scully, a bioethicist. The lecture was entitled *God's ways, not our ways: a dissident Quaker response to disability*. Jackie brings over 60 years of experience to her subject and 30 years as a disability activist. She asks the question: 'What might disability, difference and normality mean for Friends today?' as we enter a world where medical science now provides knowledge which allows us to decide who should be born and when they will die. We need to address the spiritual as well

as the moral and socio-political aspects of these questions. We are all limited, different and vulnerable, dependent on our communities.

We were lifted up to learn of the work of the Friends' School and to meet the new Principal, Esther Hill. She told us how Quaker values and practices are incorporated into the daily life at the school, addressing the prickly issue of privilege and the role of a private school to model a different kind of curriculum and do things that a government school could not attempt. We were pleased to hear of the large numbers of scholarships offered to children whose families who could otherwise not afford to send them to Friends' School. She was joined by Friends from the Quaker Values Committee and by some inspiring year 11 and 12 students who spoke lovingly about their school.

During the Meeting for Remembrance we were distracted by the flittering movement of a Willy Wagtail bird. Michael Leunig, an Australian poet, likens talking to God to talking to a bird. Attempts were made to encourage the bird to leave the room, but the bird could not find its way out until later. No one saw it leave.

On Wednesday afternoon we left the West Beach and travelled to destinations of Quaker interest around Adelaide. The Quaker opportunity Shop, which has been operating since the 1968, was a popular destination.

We heard about the ongoing work of Silver Wattle involving land care, sojourning and learning opportunities. We are grateful for the vision and the struggle of the founders of Silver Wattle and rejoice in the growing realisation of the dream to create a centre of learning and spiritual nourishment for our community.

Quaker Service Australia (QSA) has a new constitution and encouraged us to become members of the company and to donate to their projects to build positive peace.

We look around the meeting at the high proportion of white-haired Friends and we know we need to rebuild our young community. Young Friends and JYFs told us about their urgent need to meet in person regularly at AYM to build their own community and learn from older Friends. They want to remember cooling off in water fights as well as experience Quaker processes. We continue to discern the right timing of Yearly Meeting.

We were surprised by a visit from George Fox and some of the Valiant 60. and celebrated his 400th birthday with cake and singing the George Fox song. Later there was an enthusiastic concert.

'How can we make impactful action?' has been a reoccurring question and theme across this Meeting. What do we need to do now to continue to uphold our values of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality and stewardship?