

STATE OF THE SOCIETY ADDRESS 2010

By Elizabeth Kwan, Darwin, South Australia RM

Greetings from Darwin, a third of the way into the steamy wet season, whose threat of occasional cyclones ceases only after April. Australians are used to talking about the weather, especially farmers, I remember in growing up in country South Australia. But now, living with the effects of global warming, Australians are talking about the weather with alarm. Quakers especially – and our children – are taking seriously the challenge of caring for the earth.

This is the first of five significant challenges I see facing Australian Quakers, after studying the reports of Regional Meetings, and Yearly Meeting officers, committees, working groups and associated bodies. I come to this task of assessing the state of our Society as a Member since 2000, having taken that step while attending Canberra Local Meeting. A member of the Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice Committee, I was its convenor in 2002, the year it produced the first draft of *this we can say*. Now in Darwin I worship with a very small Quaker group, co-ordinate AVP workshops, attend South Australia Regional Meeting's annual residential weekend and Yearly Meeting, and serve on Regional Meeting's Ministry and Oversight Committee, and Yearly Meeting's Australian Quaker Centre Working Group. By profession, I'm a historian with an interest in issues of national identity.

Caring for the earth

Yearly Meeting 2009 went beyond the Earthcare Statement of 2008 to establish an Earthcare Committee, asking it to use the terms of reference drawn up by the Summer School on Climate Change to draft a public statement on safe climate. Our children also wanted us to act. Standing Committee urged the Committee to seek ways of cooperating with non-Quaker organisations with a similar concern

about the earth. We look forward to its report in this year's Preparatory Session on Earthcare.

In the meantime Yearly Meeting Secretary has reduced money and energy spent on photocopying and postage by placing many resources on the Quaker website, making the library of Australia Yearly Meeting office widely accessible. Regional Meetings have responded to the call for change. Brisbane Local Meeting has installed rainwater tanks, and, with the help of a community solar power grant from the Australian Greenhouse Office and carbon offset payment from Yearly Meeting Finance Committee, solar voltaic panels which supply two-thirds of the Meeting House's current electricity consumption. Local Meetings in Adelaide and Perth have installed or are installing solar panels, which Tasmanian Friends are also considering, along with double glazing.

Meetings have created a range of opportunities for Friends and their children to learn more about climate change and earth care: discussion of sources on global warming; practical action towards sustainability, including related children's activities; and care of the native forest attached to a Meeting House.

Striving to care for the earth has also been a central consideration in Quaker Service Australia and in the wider Quaker community of the Asia West Pacific Region, where many Friends are likely to feel the immediate effects of climate change. QSA reported increasing difficulties with their projects in addressing issues of food and water security and environmental sustainability. The Global Climate Change Committee established by the Asia West Pacific Section of FWCC has been developing a global voice with other Quakers around the world, supporting two Friends from Japan and China to participate in the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen.

The challenge for Friends to minimise our impact on the world's resources is a huge one, as our children reminded us at Yearly Meeting last year. What shall we say to them this year about how we can further protect their future?

Placing children and Junior Young Friends at the centre of our Quaker community

A second challenge evident in the reports is to place children and Junior Young Friends at the centre of the Quaker community, a challenge the Children's and Young Friends' Committee recognised would 'require a culture change for Australian Friends'. 'Not many Friends', the Committee noted after its survey of Meetings, 'seem to take an interest in the children and JYFs'.

This view is a sobering indictment of our Society. Shouldn't we be welcoming children, inspiring them with our testimonies to join us in serving them, too? Among the recommendations made by the Committee are two in particular, requesting: 'a resource specifically designed for Australian children' in educating them about their Quaker heritage; and the appointment by Regional Meeting of committed persons as children's coordinators to support parents, carers, children and JYFs whenever Quakers meet. The plea is a reminder to us of Helen Bayes' call in her Backhouse Lecture of 2003 to 'find new ways to worship with children and young people so that we may more fully hear their Truth and nurture their capacity to speak and live by it.' What more can we do to make that vision a reality?

Involving our smaller Meetings in the wider Quaker community

Most Regional Meetings reported camps or activity days during the year to draw together families and children from several meetings. They reflect the third challenge of involving the smaller, less experienced and more vulnerable Worship Meetings in the wider Quaker community.

The New South Wales Regional Report recognised that ‘Visits between Meetings...help to foster our sense of a Regional Meeting’ and ‘also help the smaller Meetings to develop their understanding of Quakerism’. The Queensland report mentioned regular visits by Brisbane Friends to ‘smaller, outlying meetings’ in the suburbs, and further afield to country Meetings. South Australia generously offers a travel subsidy to Friends in far away Alice Springs and Darwin in the Northern Territory to encourage us to come to the mid-year residential weekend in Adelaide, as well as to Yearly Meeting. Distant Friends themselves in rural and regional Australia have reached out to others. North Queensland Recognised Meeting included me from Darwin as well as another Friend from Townsville in a stimulating Quaker reflective weekend in Cairns led by Dale Hess from Victoria. In Western Australia, three meetings distant from Perth organised successful gatherings.

We need to remind ourselves, in meetings small and large – lest we forget – that our Membership in the Religious Society of Friends in Australia comes to us through membership in one of the seven constituent Regional Meetings, based in capital cities. This federal, highly urbanised pattern reflects the nature of the country as well as its invasion and settlement by the British. Further, within each Regional Meeting the one or two large Local Meetings – or Recognised Meetings in the case of Perth – play leading roles in the metropolitan areas. Queensland Regional Meeting acknowledged that much of its report ‘focuses on the activities of Brisbane Local Meeting from which most of the committees are presently drawn’. South Australia, mindful that ‘[t]he challenge of inclusive and supportive connections with groups beyond Adelaide is ever with us’, has welcomed the participation of these groups in its Committees. It also occasionally holds its Meetings for Business away from Adelaide. This is an important practice in developing smaller meetings’ understanding of Quaker processes – but one easier to foster in country South Australia than in the far more distant Northern Territory.

The latest revision of the *Handbook of Quaker Practice and Procedures in Australia* reflects this more comprehensive view of the Quaker community. Where once the Preface spoke of ‘the Local Meeting and its satellite Recognised Meetings and Worshipping Groups’, it now speaks of ‘the various kinds of Worship Meetings’. Where once Chapter 2 spoke of the Local Meeting as ‘the foundation of the Society of Friends, the heart, brain and spirit of the Society’, it now speaks of the different kinds of Meeting from Worshipping Group to Australia Yearly Meeting, and the ‘threefold allegiance’ to one’s Worship Meeting, Regional Meeting and Yearly Meeting. For Members of the Society, wherever we live, this threefold allegiance means the commitment of our energy, time and resources to all three levels to the extent that we are able. Some go further, contributing to the Asia West Pacific Section of FWCC.

I welcome this growing recognition of the importance of the Quaker network linking the smallest Worshipping Group via Regional Meeting to Yearly Meeting. How can Regional Meetings further nurture smaller meetings to ensure they are familiar with Quaker processes and just in using them? How can smaller meetings, in turn, contribute to the wider Quaker community?

Acknowledging and resolving conflict within the Quaker community

Acknowledging conflict within the Quaker community and using Quaker and other processes to resolve it is a fourth, and particularly demanding challenge for Friends. With a reputation for peacemaking in the wider society, Friends have found making peace within their own Society difficult.

Significantly Regional Meeting reports this year indicate progress on this issue. New South Wales recorded Devonshire Street Meeting’s successful use of a workshop on unity through discernment by two interstate Friends in dealing with tensions between the Jesus Christians and other Friends. Yearly Meeting, having received a detailed report recommending its sale of The Sanctuary at Wahroonga, New South Wales, is involving Wahroonga Local Meeting and the

Regional Meeting in considering the impact of the sale on these Meetings. In Victoria and South Australia 'a continuing return to Quaker process', as the South Australian report expressed it, has seen longstanding difficulties in two Local Meetings begun to be addressed in a creative and healing way. Western Australians devised three Interpersonal Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution workshops to explore Friends' attitudes and responses to tensions in Meetings.

In openly acknowledging conflict among Quakers and resolving it sensitively through Quaker and other processes, Friends are practising – and being seen to practise – what they preach. This year's residential weekend of South Australia Regional Meeting examined conflict within the Quaker community, from the time of George Fox to the present, and the way Friends have dealt with it. The report of the weekend's deliberations recognised Friends' difficulties in resolving conflict within their own community, and their awareness that unresolved conflict deadens the life of Meetings. South Australia's Ministry and Oversight Committee is now considering the report's recommendation of a survey of Meetings regarding the use of Quaker processes in dealing with conflict among Friends, and the ways in which Ministry and Oversight Committees can assist.

Grievance Procedures for resolving conflict between members of a Meeting or Committee, or between an individual and the broader Quaker community have been revised by the Handbook Committee. However, a volunteer working group, asked by Standing Committee to carry out a further review, has taken a fresh look at the issue and made useful amendments for Yearly Meeting to consider. How well these provisions can resolve conflict in small Worshipping Groups or Recognised Meetings far from Regional Meeting remains doubtful.

Related to this issue is the training of Elders and Overseers. When grievances arise, Ministry and Oversight are often called on to help resolve them.

We need to ensure that these Friends have a sound knowledge of, and confidence in using, Quaker processes. Yearly Meeting 2009 asked the Elders and Overseers – Training Development Group to continue its work in developing a modular curriculum with the support of Quaker Learning Australia, and encouraged Regional Meetings to proceed with their own training and development.

Unfortunately the Training Development Group has been unable to meet this year. Regional Meeting reports made no mention of training programs, though two of them mentioned the work of Elders and Overseers. Canberra Regional Meeting held an Eldering weekend at the Australian Quaker Centre. Quaker Learning Australia has placed the Elders Pack produced by Victoria Regional Meeting on its website. Given the important role expected of Elders and Overseers in maintaining the health of our Meetings, it would be useful to know whether Regional Meetings have arranged training programs for their Members, and what use has been made of the Elders Pack.

Developing the Australian Quaker Centre

A fifth and final challenge I see facing the Quaker community in Australia this year are the two decisions surrounding the Australian Quaker Centre. Are we willing to develop our own inspirational study and retreat centre, rather than continue to pay the costs of travel to, and retreats and courses in, centres in Britain and America? If so, how can that best be done?

Growing steadily out of last year's Yearly Meeting and the Working Group led by David Johnson, the Centre became a reality in September at *Silver Wattle*, leased near Bungendore, NSW with Helen Bayes as director. This Centre is comparable to earlier moves in building Australian Quaker institutions, such as The Friends' School in Hobart in 1887, the journal, *The Australian Friend* in the same year in Hobart, and the Australian General Meeting in 1902, which became Australia Yearly Meeting in 1964, independent from London Yearly Meeting.

Quaker Service Australia emerged in the same decade. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia became incorporated under ACT law in 1967 with its own *Handbook of Practice and Procedure*.

But it was not until 2003 that Australia Yearly Meeting published its own collection of writings, *this we can say: Australian Quaker life, faith and thought*, to join the long used and well loved *Quaker Faith & Practice* editions from Britain. Australian and British *Advices & Queries* followed in 2008 with Quakers Australia's own logo, Aurora Australis.

We need to bear in mind this longer perspective, reaching back to the 1880s, when considering the role of the Australian Quaker Centre and the potential it offers to Quaker communities, not just in Australia, but in our Asian West Pacific region. In becoming an independent Yearly Meeting with a paid official as coordinator, in publishing *this we can say* and devising Australian advices and queries, Australian Quakers found their own voice. The Quaker Centre can further develop that voice in helping define the future of Quakers Australia by assessing our priorities and advising how best to pursue them in relation to our time, energy and resources.

Mindful of the Spirit which seeks to draw us together in unity, I hope that as we discuss and make decisions on a wide range of matters this week we'll find ways of living 'adventurously' in caring for the earth, placing youth at the centre of our community, involving our smaller Meetings, acknowledging and resolving our conflicts, and developing the potential of the Australian Quaker Centre. These challenges go to the very heart of meeting the needs of Quakers Australia.

Elizabeth Kwan