

Epistle for 2010

from the Religious Society of Friends Yearly Meeting
of Aotearoa New Zealand Te Haahi Tuuhauwiri

9 – 12 July 2010

Greetings to Friends Everywhere

Seventy nine Friends met at John McGlashan College, Dunedin from Friday 9 July to Monday 12 July 2010 for the Yearly Meeting. We were warmly welcomed by the Yearly Meeting Clerks and by friends from Dunedin Monthly Meeting, who reminded us that we meet in the Divine presence. The rohe of the land is held by Kai Tahu, Kati Mamoe and Waitaha people. Whanau a Paki (Flagstaff) is the mountain which looks down on us and Owheo (Leith) the river which runs down the valley. He iti he pounamu – small but precious – is our earth. Our gathering was blessed with peaceful beautiful surroundings and the song of the bellbird. Dunedin Meeting had re-named the rooms we used after stalwart Dunedin Friends who started and maintained the tiny meeting from the 1880s. Some of their stories had been displayed for us to read.

Visiting Friends from Australia, North Pacific, Denmark and Britain YMs were welcomed. One letter of introduction was read out in Welsh. We were sad that one invited Friend from India was unable to attend.

After an opening period of worship the YM Clerks Claire Gregory and Linley Gregory spoke on the state of the Society. They emphasised the importance of building and nurturing our meeting communities. How can we be tender with each other at times when there is ongoing hurt? We were reminded that meetings for business are meetings for worship in which our business is done and that they are conducted in the same openness to the leading of the Spirit. The business of this meeting was consequently conducted in a disciplined, reflective, calm way, imbued with worship, respect for each other and for Quaker process.

We became aware of threads which ran through this Yearly Meeting, reappearing in different sessions. One of these was change. We started with a worship sharing session using the six queries posed by FWCC on the spiritual basis of our response to global change. We learned that a change of attitude in ourselves is required as a precursor to action and to the education of others. Changes in our society and in the political climate influence what we do.

In another session the meeting was introduced to the idea of Strong Sustainability which is based on a stable state economic system which does not depend on material growth.

The 2010 public Quaker Lecture was delivered by Kevin Clements of Dunedin Monthly Meeting. The title of the lecture was “Honouring the Other – The quest for respect, equality and small goodnesses in Aotearoa New Zealand”. He asked questions on the ethics of non-violence and drew on the wisdom of three philosophers: Martin Buber, Albert Schweitzer and particularly Emmanuel Levinas. A key message was not to let abstractions obscure the individual faces within groups that we perceive as external to ourselves. Kevin Clements then applied these ideas in the context of Maori, Pakeha and people of other ethnic groups in

Aotearoa/New Zealand. We have to learn how to honour and have radical respect for the Other.

This theme of face to face engagement has been another recurring thread during our gathering, notably in the sessions on Treaty Issues and travel to Friends' gatherings. An inherent paradox exists between our individual experience of the spirit as against our corporate action. We were much exercised in facing the dilemma between wanting to meet face to face, for which there is no adequate substitute, and our recognition that travel, particularly by air, involves increased consumption of the earth's resources. Monthly meetings are to be asked to consider how best to achieve shared responsibility and remedial action for the use of carbon when incurred by representatives travelling on our behalf.

An example of the benefit of Quaker process was the leaving of our decision-making on this issue so that we could wait for guidance in the unprogrammed Meeting for Worship held with our friends at the Dunedin Meeting House.

Following closely on the idea of engaging face to face was the need for conversations, which became evident in the session on Treaty Issues and the session where we started to develop a vision for our own education. Conversations are fundamentally different from consultations or dialogues. We need to continue to learn, and to learn in new ways, how to live in community and to deal with conflict.

When we considered penal reform, we learned that the current climate which is influencing the government and the media leads to populist rather than considered, evidence-based decision making. This results in an emphasis on punishment rather than prevention and rehabilitation. A new trust has been formed in Aotearoa New Zealand, whose focus is public education about penal reform. This gives some hope of change here. A book dealing with inequality has been recommended to us entitled 'The Spirit Level: Why Equality is better for everyone' by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett.

We as Quakers are able to offer unique gifts to our own society and to the world in these challenging times. These include our testimonies, together with faith that we can both change ourselves and thereby encourage change. A Friend spoke of "a new freshness in the world's atmosphere", and a visiting Friend gave this ministry: "The movement for sustainability is bubbling up throughout the earth. and I do have hope."

Claire Gregory and Linley Gregory
Co-clerks