

Epistle for 2011

from Yearly Meeting

of the Religious Society of Friends Aotearoa New Zealand

Greetings to Friends everywhere

The Yearly Meeting of Aotearoa/New Zealand was held May 20-23, 2011 at the Quaker Settlement in Whanganui and included visiting Friends from Australia, South Korea and Britain.

The opening welcome, partly in Te Reo Maori, confirmed for us that the Quaker Settlement is the “turangawaewae” for Aotearoa/New Zealand Friends-- our place to stand. The opening signalled the importance of Maori as the indigenous people and of the land and environment which supports us. An early Quaker presence in the area was consolidated by the development of the former Friends School in the 1920s. More recently, Friends have supported the land claims of local Maori, for example, the occupation of Pakaitore/Motua Gardens in 1995.

There was an impassioned call for Friends to engage in the discussion about the need for a constitutional review that is currently taking place in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Proposals are to be presented to Yearly Meeting in 2012.

The present structure of government concentrates power in the hands of a small political elite influenced by lobbyists and overseas interests. This process ignores the promise of equal power that is embodied in the 1840 Tiriti o Waitangi/Treaty of Waitangi.

Friends were asked to become better informed about the options for constitutional change and be catalysts for further discussion in the wider community. We were urged to take the issue to our Monthly Meeting.

A significant event for Aotearoa/New Zealand Friends in the past year was the experience of major earthquakes in Christchurch on September 4th, 2010 and February 22nd, 2011. These were followed by nearly 8,000 aftershocks, which continue to occur. Five Christchurch Friends described their devastating experience. They helped us to imagine the grief, confusion and uncertainty caused by the loss of friends, colleagues and familiar features across the City.

Christchurch Friends described how the experience has left them emotionally vulnerable and prone to tiredness and tears. They were adamant that “we will cope” and asked us to stay with them in the unknown and to hold them in the Light as they make their decisions about the future of their meeting house. The accounts of our Christchurch Friends have helped us to a better understanding of the pain, grief and terror suffered by the people of Japan from the effects of their earthquake in April, tsunami and nuclear leakages.

Aspects of participation in the Asia West Pacific Section of the FWCC were recounted by our four Friends at the gathering in Manila, the Philippines in April 2011. They gave us a glimpse of the wider Quaker world. We look forward to supporting our member Patricia Macgregor as she takes over the position of Section Clerk, and support all our Friends attending the World Conference in Kenya in 2012.

Tony Taylor, member of the Kapiti Monthly Meeting and Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Victoria University, Wellington, delivered a well-attended public lecture on “Changing the Prison System”. The challenges for Aotearoa/New Zealand are to lower incarceration rates, provide

rehabilitation for all inmates including short-term, and support for victims and the families of prisoners.

Friends exchanged impassioned views on ways to reduce or off-set the environmental cost of travel on behalf of YM. This discussion broadened to how we can reduce our carbon footprint individually and collectively. We acknowledge the imperative of moving to renewable sources of energy and changing lifestyles. The task is to find ways to do this without imposing moral 'guilt trips' on individuals.

We honour the land where we have been for our Yearly Meeting and remember the Friends School motto; "The Truth shall make you free."

We pray that we are given the passion and energy of early Friends which enabled them to try hard to transform themselves and their world.

Claire Gregory and Linley Gregory

Co-clerks