

# Reflections on Aotearoa's YM2022

Michael Searle 5 May 2022

This was the first YM Aotearoa Quakers have held online. Planning had been for an in-person YM, but Covid forced the change.

This is a brief report of some of the highlights and lessons learned from the involvement of Ronis and me in helping with their technology, especially Zoom use. Many other aspects are not included, for the sake of brevity.

## Pre-YM Zoom training and user competence

We offered some Zoom training sessions for participants prior to YM. The turnout was reasonable, far from all that might have. We made the sessions fun, and people said they all learned something about using Zoom. Because we knew how it was planned to use social breakout rooms, we covered how people could move themselves into and between rooms. This gave a good outcome.

I was pleased at the overall level of user competence in YM sessions; most were completely at home with using muting, **Raise Hand**, and navigation in breakout rooms. Friends performed better than I had expected, which increases my expectations for Australian Friends.

People were patient, and very accepting of the couple of situations where something did not work as planned. They just waited patiently.

People were pleased with the YM experience; feedback has been positive, some glowing from individuals who would speak their minds if they perceived inadequacies.

I will be very interested to hear the reflections of Bruce Henry and Aletia Dundas, both of whom attended most activities.

## Co-location

When we decided to go online, an active question was where to clerk and host it from. We chose The Settlement—slight trepidation that the wifi might not hold up. The Clerks were seated at one trestle table, the Z-hosts (Ronis and Michael) were seated next to them, at another trestle, in an open-V arrangement. We all had a good view of the Settlement's large TV/screen. This normally carried a 7x7=49 picture view of the meeting.



Michael's computer was set up as the main Zoom connection. Two webcams, and two microphones gave the ability to switch between focus on the Clerks, and focus on Michael. Michael controlled muting and switching. When clerks needed to confer, Michael saw this and muted them. Michael watched for muting and lowering hands of participants, and renamed a few.

The Clerk's computer with a second screen displayed what they chose: Speaker view or Gallery view. It also had the document in which they had their agenda, draft minutes and in which they edited drafts. The minutes document was never screen-shared, though it could have been.

Ronis had her own computer with a second screen. She kept a close eye on Chat (restricted to Hosts Only); she communicated with Co-Hosts at times. Ronis also set up and managed the breakout rooms which followed formal sessions.

The Clerks are a married couple (Anne and Alistair Hall); they found that they needed lots of time out of sessions to reflect, to tweak minutes, etc. They were living in at The Settlement. Some kind Friends provided most meals for the Clerks and Hosting team.

Co-location was a huge boon. In every session we made some adjustments to how things would run, how the breakout rooms would be set up, etc. My observation is that co-location of the clerking team and the zoom hosts is definitely worth striving for. In our context, conversation between all members of the clerking team will be severely impeded if separated. We anticipate that considerable care and work will be needed to triage, filter, sort matters for YM business session. If not co-located, conversations between the clerking team would require moving them into a breakout room mid-meeting, possibly often. This is certainly possible, but would be more disruptive to the meeting. A lot of time in out-of session planning meetings would need to be done online, increasing screen time considerably. Co-location of the tech hub will give much more confidence to all that the technology will be operated in a way that is comfortable for the clerking team. If changes to setup would be beneficial, they could be made between activities easily, so as to increase everyone's comfort and confidence.

## Business sessions

Since this was the inaugural online YM, the scope was kept limited. An Aotearoan YM usually runs from Thursday evening to Sunday evening, having six business sessions. Some committees met (online) in the spaces. Thursday daytime has a long session for preparation of heart and mind. The epistle was one such; they developed a very compelling epistle. This pattern of scope and timetable was adopted for this online YM.

There was concern that business sessions might not work well; however general agreement was that they were successful. The increased participation made possible by online use was appreciated. With Covid uncertainty still quite high, many Friends would not have wanted to risk being in an aircraft or public transport with strangers, so would have stayed away. Also appreciated was better ability to see and hear contributions.

Several people "dipped into YM" in a way that they would not have in-person. In most sessions, the Clerks closed the consideration of the topic when they felt confident they had the sense of the meeting, not necessarily presenting a summative minute in that session. They sometimes went away and brought a minute back to a later session. Overall this method worked well.

Business sessions had 50 to 60 screens participating, with some ten of those having two people in their room. Participation in the final session was at a level similar to earlier ones, ie, almost no drop-off.

## Social breakout rooms

At the end of each business session, we set up a large number of breakout rooms, using the option that a person could take themselves to the room of their choosing. They could then have social conversation with others in that room. Some rooms were designated with a topic (eg the name of a visitor or presenter during the previous session), some were designated with a **(2)** to be available for a pair conversation, some were designated as **Social**.

This idea has been around for some time. Australian organisers have been hesitant on the basis that it increases screen time and Zoom fatigue, that it might be unrealistic to set up, and that Friends may find the technical steps too difficult.

The experience of this leads us to believe that it was very welcome and viewed very positively. Some three-quarters stayed, most navigated successfully to a room of their choice. Some stayed for help from the hosts. Some visited a second room during the 30 minutes of the social time.

Presenters at YM sessions who moved to a break out room during social time attracted a good crowd; presumably people were pleased to be able to discuss and question further.

For Australia, thought needs to be given to when to hold them. In Aotearoa, it worked well to append them to each business session. That might not be the optimal formula in Australia.

## Registration

We used a Jotform registration form similar to what is set up for Australia's YM. The initial version included the questions that were relevant to the planned live-in event. The form was reduced when the decision to go online was made.

The details of those who registered were available to those who needed them via a Google Sheet, auto-filled by Jotform.

Just over 100 people registered. Participation was typically around 65 people in a session.

## All-age worship

A national all-age Meeting for Worship was held at 10am on Sunday morning; local meetings were encouraged to join it. Melinda Wenner Bradley, of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting presented a **Faith and Play** story about gifts. There had been some skepticism generally that this would be of value, or sufficiently worshipful. Three local meetings (in their Meeting Houses) joined the national hook-up.

The response to this was phenomenally positive. I think it changed many people's perceptions about:

- What worship can be
- The importance of including children in our worship; even making adaptations to increase child-friendliness
- The desirability of conducting regular national all-age worship hook-ups

This activity helped increase a positive vibe and energy-level of the whole subsequent YM gathering. It also fed well into the considerations which are on-going here about the inclusion of children in meetings.

The picture is of the aid to the story that Melinda built up, about **gifts**. This was her view of the activity.



## Wifi and infrastructure issues

The Settlement's wifi is currently a subject of concern; its upgrading is under active investigation. We had tested that it would sustain multiple connections in the Quiet Room..

In fact it worked well and sustained the four connections that were the base load on it. At one point it failed, completely, went off-air! We were concerned that this would end the meeting! In fact, we had appointed a person in a different place (on his own wifi) as a CoHost. When we rejoined the meeting via a hotspot, the meeting was going on quite happily without the clerking team. The online meeting has not shut down, and could be picked up. We were delighted!

We learned the importance of having a separated co-host, even if their operational role is minimal. Zoom meetings do not like there not being a host. We have not tested this, but presume Zoom would have closed the meeting if there had not been a co-host to be promoted to Host at the disappearance of the initial host.

## The importance of tech team

As indicated immediately above, we were saved by having a co-host in a different place. Whilst we had good participant skills, the pool of people with hosting skills is smaller. Of course, some of those are involved in other committees, etc. We would like to provide more sessions, even now, on hosting skills for NZ Zoom hosts. We observe that some people who do host online meetings display a low level of understanding and skill. Because the YM only lasts a long weekend, it was feasible for Ronis and Michael to be the Z-hosts for each session.

## Rehearsals

There were few sessions in which screen-sharing was used. However, the opening session had a presentation which required displaying a PowerPoint into the meeting. We had not rehearsed this, and a couple of unfortunate tech mishaps caused a glitch in the flow of the meeting. It reminded us that it is important to rehearse anything of this kind which is out of the ordinary, to ensure that all the right bits are in place. Nonetheless, participants were very accepting of this glitch.