

Epistle from 2009

Aotearoa New Zealand Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

One hundred and fifteen Quakers gathered at Scots College, Wellington, from Thursday, 9 July to Sunday, 12 July for the 2009 Yearly Meeting. The first meeting for business of the Society in Aotearoa/New Zealand took place 100 years ago in this same city. We welcomed Friends from Great Britain, United States of America and Australia and received messages from other Yearly Meetings and those unable to be present.

We were greeted on arrival with a reminder of the greenhouse gas emissions created by travel to this meeting. Our emissions are miniscule compared with those generated by war and its preparation. Due to such unsustainable practices the global environmental situation is deteriorating rapidly. Environmental pressures are likely to increase conflict situations. Our Quaker Testimonies are therefore becoming more important than ever.

We were reminded that one hundred years ago our inaugural meeting wrote to the prime minister of the day with regard to our testimony for peace. We will be writing to our current prime minister on similar terms.

Bill Willmott of Christchurch Meeting delivered the public Quaker Centennial Lecture titled *Kiwi Dragon: The Chinese in Aotearoa New Zealand: history, culture, hope* at the Wellington Town Hall on the Thursday evening.

This lecture introduced a theme of the need to understand and be confident of who we are, in order to value others despite our differences. Too often in the past such differences have been regarded as a threat and have led to misunderstanding, discrimination and abuse.

This theme was later built upon in Betsy Brinson's film about the history of civil rights in Kentucky. It was further developed in our consideration of the need for constitutional arrangements that better recognise the place of Maori as the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand. We feel the current system advances the interests of the majority at their expense despite guarantees in our country's founding document, The Treaty of Waitangi.

Another manifestation of this theme came from Young Friends reporting their experiences with Indian Friends in Bhopal. They were struck by significant differences within the Quaker family. They initially found these differences very confronting but after being together so closely they came to an acceptance of their varying views.

We have been exercised as usual by the right use of money. We have reminded ourselves that money is simply a means to achieve our vision rather than an end in itself. We agree that any use of money including investment needs to be ethical and support sustainable practices. We were challenged by the need to find the correct balance between retention of capital and maintaining our level of contributions within this difficult economic climate.

A group of Friends have worked on a sexual harassment handbook for a number of years. They introduced it to us by tracing the history of changing attitudes to this aspect of how we relate to each other. It highlighted the need to understand the past in order to build a different future.

Understanding the past requires valuing and caring for our archives. We were therefore delighted to hear of significant progress in the organisation and safe keeping of our archives. It was also a pleasure to hear the updated history of Whanganui Friends School in a nostalgic audiovisual presentation. Although the school no longer exists, from its ashes rose our much beloved educational centre, Quaker Acres.

In our consideration of how best to fulfil our testimonies we have worked together on some major issues over the last three days. In the words of ministry from one of our younger friends, we have felt supported, as by wings in flight, by those around us, past and present.