

Local Arrangements Committee (LAC) Reflections on YM23

(Draft v0.1)

At the Settlement, Whanganui, hosted by Whanganui MM

Introduction

Aotearoa's YM23 was always planned as a hybrid gathering, with the in-person part at the Settlement, and available to online participation. Whanganui Monthly Meeting was the hosting MM. It was planned for the weekend of Thursday 18 (Preparation Day) to Monday 22 May.

The aim was to include both people "in the room" and those online in the discernment processes of YM sessions, as well as some sharing of worship and socialisation.

Due to Covid, YM20 was cancelled and YM22 was all online so the anticipation of being able to get together in person was very great.

Whanganui MM, via the LAC hoped to provide a very welcoming YM, that used the familiarity of the Settlement to full advantage. Informal feedback suggests we achieved these aims.

Planning

The LAC was made up of 7 Friends. We met initially about monthly, more frequently close to the event. We made our meetings available to the YM Clerks via Zoom—they participated sometimes, as appropriate.

Being at the Settlement meant that the LAC had to do some extra tasks that might be undertaken by the venue in other locations. On the other hand, knowing the Settlement people well, being able to start setting up well ahead of the event gave us some clear advantages, compared with other venues.

Settlement residents were generous in the support they offered to the YM event.

Planning around Covid risks

Covid continues to be present in the community and poses risks for older Friends and those with compromised health conditions. Friends were asked to test for Covid before beginning their journey to YM and stay home if they tested positive or were at all unwell. The LAC had supplies of RAT kits at the registration desk and Friends were asked a standard question: had they tested? If not they were asked to take a test at that point. Efforts were made throughout the gathering to maintain air flow indoors. Supplies of masks were available and some Friends took the precaution of wearing one. House C was setup in readiness for use as an isolation space for anyone who tested positive and was not able to travel home safely. There were no Covid cases reported from the entire gathering, which is very pleasing.

Preparation Day

The purpose of this preparation day was to ground and deepen ourselves and begin to create a worshipful community for Yearly Meeting 2023. This was led by David James, Jillian Wychel and Linley Gregory. It familiarised participants with the new version of the Quaker Handbook.

The facilitators decided not include Zoom availability, since this would have required different design, and for the tech to be set up earlier. About half of those who registered in-person also participated in the Preparation Day. the activity was well received. The sense was that it helped prepare people for the YM sessions processes well.

Preparation Day can be facilitated by others beyond the LAC, and even the host Meeting. It is a big piece of work. It is also important to remember that Preparation Day occurs as YM is getting going, so some of the LAC people need to stay available for external tasks and questions that will arise.

Orientation to the Blended style of meeting

We suggest that at future Yearly meetings an Online orientation time be organised. This would be targeted at Online participants, and they would receive specific invitation to it. However, In-person participants may find it useful, and would be encouraged to attend. Probably an hour on the Thursday evening to talk about how the technology will work and also discuss ways that Onliners would participate and could socialise during YM.

Registration

Registration was done via a JotForm online form. Jotform was selected because it allows branching logic. Thus different questions were presented once a person had chosen participation In-person (eg accommodation, catering needs) vs Online (participation in a small group, or singly). Jotform also calculated the price of the items selected, and presented them to the registrant, and recorded it. Jotform puts the responses into a GoogleSheet document, which is available to those who are given access. This was a great benefit; it enabled those who needed to act on the bookings information to access it immediately (eg treasurer, accommodation allocator, catering liaison, transport coordinator).

Each category of registrant was sent several emails, reminding them of their choices, and giving them updates of information relevant to their booking.

Having name tags and their accommodation information ready for each person as they checked in simplified the check-in process.

Registration was closed for in-person participation two weeks before YM started, then online was closed one week before. There were minimal last-minute changes. One person changed from in-person to online, concerned about Covid. A very small number came online unregistered.

Technology that was used

One hopes to implement technology in a way which minimises intrusion into a meeting. The design of the technology was conscious of trying to balance function with intrusiveness. For this reason, a remote-controlled camera was used from an out-of-the-way location, for example.

Quaker Waves wi-fi

Despite some glitches with Quaker Waves during the preceding two weeks, the QW wifi worked faultlessly during YM23. There were no interruptions to sessions, and no complaints were heard from participants about wifi misbehaviour at other times. The cause of the glitches has probably been corrected now.

Zoom accounts

There is likely to be need for ad hoc meetings (eg Pastoral Care) that require to use a Zoom meeting. The simplest way to do this is for each such group to be allocated a Zoom account that they can use at any time. An account that belongs to one of the constituent MMs would be ideal.

Michael is writing a separate report (more technical detail) on setting up for:

- Sound reinforcement in the room
- Zoom
- Operating equipment, microphones, etc.

How it worked

Several adjustments to the Quiet Room were made ahead of time, and in consultation with the Settlement. Blinds were installed in each window, to enable better control of lighting when bright sunshine can cause difficulty for cameras. A large screen TV was purchased and installed to enable the presentation of Zoom images.

The YM Clerks visited the Settlement and worked out many aspects of implementing the technology ahead of time with the technical team. This included positioning of tables and cameras, microphones, lighting, etc. this facilitated achieving a good result.

An unfortunate aspect was that the tech team had purchased some wireless microphones to augment the pair already at the Settlement. An unfortunate slip caused them to stop working at a time when replacement was impossible. So, we made do with one pair of microphones. This was not fatal, but caused some extra work, and some reduction in audibility at times. It was hard to position a microphone close enough to the Clerks for good audibility, without being in their way. Having the 2 extra microphones would have made things a lot easier.

It is very necessary, when doing something new, to be able to test and rehearse. It would have been ideal to be able to rehearse with the Clerks how a part of a business meeting would run, controlling cameras, sound, etc. this was not possible to do.

Similarly, each day, some equipment is taken home, for its safety. Thus it has to be re-connected and activated at the start of each day. some testing needs to be included in this. Because everything happened in the Quiet Room (including morning Meeting for Worship), the time available for daily setup was quite restricted. Some mal-functions resulted from this.

Planning the use of spaces needs to take this into account. For example, it would have been helpful if the 8.30 Meeting for Worship was not held in the Quiet Room so that there was plenty of time for setting up.

Setting up

Prior to the start of a YM, there is inevitably a lot of work to set up as one wants. Tables for displays, Quaker Book Sales are examples. Directing and information notices are another task.

Ideally, there is a team of people to help with these tasks. Not all need to be members of the LAC, nor even locals, but planning needs to include liaising with them. Val Bone and Ann Banks provided very useful service in helping us set up.

Another task was to set up the dining room to accommodate the 65-ish people for meals, and to plan the flow for serving, for coffee breaks, etc. this was all liaised with the cooks. A good result was achieved, but it needed a lot of time and thought.

Transport

Many people took full responsibility for their own transport end-to-end. Some people came by bus, or public transport, and needed us to transport them the “last mile”. This was all worked out from questions asked in the registration form, and liaised with each relevant person.

The result was that it all worked smoothly.

Catering

Meals

Catering was provided by Grant and Tess Marryatt. We were, as always, very well fed. Some of the dishes were innovative, successfully. We greatly appreciate their work.

Anticipating some 65 people in-person, we decide to increase the capacity of the Dining Room, rather than set up an external overflow space. Careful thought was given to how to set up the space to facilitate serving, etc. Two hired tables were added, the piano relocated, the existing tables moved onto the carpet area, and serving tables placed immediately outside the kitchen. Serving was straight-forward and quick, including for break-times. The tables all being together, and on the carpet gave a sense of cosiness, which was well appreciated. Coupled with appreciation for being able to meet in person, the meal-times were a great social hub. People lingered a long time in the dining room. Several times a reminder was needed that a session was about to start, time having lost its grip on many people.

Cleanup, Cleaning

The engagement of some assistants for food preparation, washup and building cleaning seemed to work well. Settlement people were left with an amount of laundry to do. The option to take it to downtown facilities might have been exercised. We appreciate their contribution.

Hired equipment

Hired items included dining room tables and chairs, some extra crockery, and several bain maries for serving. These worked well. We mainly used the bain maries which have self-contained candle warmers. It turned out that plugging in the electric bain maries was difficult, so these were really not used. In hind-sight, they were not needed; learning by experience!

Accommodation

People were asked to choose their preferred accommodation on the registration form. Most were allocated what they asked for. Most were on-site at the Settlement. Guests were accommodated in House B which was vacant at the time.

Five people stayed at the Josephite Retreat Centre, along Virginia Road. On Saturday night, a storm caused a tree to fall and bring down a power line. This left those people without light and hot water. All were asked if they would prefer to relocate, but all chose to stay put there. They had showers at the Settlement. Minor problem!

A small number of people overlooked that they needed to bring some of their own bedding. This was remedied easily by residents. Reminders could have been included in the mail-outs.

YM Sessions

Agendas, run-sheets

Considerable preparatory liaison with the YM Clerks took place, both with LAC and the tech team. This made for smooth cooperation generally. There was a moment of confusion over which tasks the LAC is responsible for. Getting clarity of this early in the planning process would be helpful.

Close to the start of YM, the Clerks produced a comprehensive Run Sheet, which was very useful.

Some of the presentations to YM sessions were made by Onliners, some of whom used screen sharing. This went smoothly. One came from our Friend in India, which had a false-start or two. Everyone waited patiently till it was sorted out.

Inclusion of Onliners and In-personners

We agreed to offer Break out rooms to those on line after each session. This did not always happen during short tea breaks. There was a pastoral care person who was online, however she was not initially linked in with the pastoral care team at the Settlement. On the second day the online PC person started meeting with the PC group and then hosted some sessions in break out rooms.

The learning from this is that it is important for the zoom host to work with the Pastoral Care group in order to make sure the on liners are connected in to the meeting.

We will send out a survey to each group of participants (In-person and Online), and ask them about their experience of session participation. Informal feedback seems to have been generally positive.

Relationship with Settlement residents

Some members of the LAC met with Settlement Management Meeting, and explained what would happen and the impact likely on the Settlement. Residents did a conscientious job of ensuring the place was prepared and presentable for us. They are always welcoming to visitors.

Some of us would prefer that YM activities be more accessible to residents.

Paid Helpers

In planning, we decided to allocate money to employ some people to do some of the domestic tasks (cleaning, washing up, setting tables). We wanted that YM participants could help if they chose, but that they would not have to miss YM sessions to cover domestic tasks. The LAC was somewhat haphazard in finding people to engage, and this was untidy till the start of YM. A number of people were brought in to help in the kitchen and with cleaning and it seemed to go well. A couple of Settlement residents pitched in and gave sterling support in the kitchen.

The Photos of In-person and on-line participants

A single photo is preferable to having to join 2 photos.

Semi-programmed M4W

On the morning of the Sunday, the YM event hosted a semi-programmed Meeting for Worship. This included the Friends in the room at the Settlement, plus Meetings in Wellington, Christchurch and Mt Eden. Each of these had children present. As well, there were about 30 individual on-screen participants (or couples). The children had been sent colouring pages. Some of them ministered during the meeting. Art-works were presented to their camera. We appreciated seeing them in Zoom's Speaker View.

The whole meeting went smoothly. The Zoom link for this session was made available more widely than just to YM participants.

The Lecture

Usually, the Quaker Lecture is delivered as part of YM. The Lecture Committee was unable to set this up for this year. In its place, Keith Beautrais spoke to us about what has taken place around the awa Whanganui River), in the recognition of its legal status as a person. Keith is a member of Te Kōpuka, which has governance and co-ordinating responsibility, and in this role continues to contribute to the downstream effects of the River's status as a person. Keith's talk was welcomed greatly. It was relayed to the Zoom audience.

Finances

Arrangements of bank accounts is less than ideal. In previous years, a new bank account was opened for each YM event. This provided for tidy account keeping.

New regulations make the process of establishing a bank account, or changing signatories much more difficult. This year, an account under WEST was used for registrants to pay into, and hold the finances. In future years, thought needs to be given to how to do this, when the host Meeting is not closely associated with WEST. We wonder if Yearly meeting could set up a separate account that is just used for the holding of the YM event. The YM Treasurer has been asked to consider this.

A YM event is not supposed to make a significant profit, or loss. Close to balance is ideal. We believe that the finances of YM23 will come out close to balance.

We wanted to ensure that YM was affordable for all Friends. Friends has the option of applying the Settlement's Pay as Led arrangement. Pack-up

Recognition that this is a non-trivial task. Someone needs to be designated to do it.

After a YM is over, there remains physical work to do. Borrowed and hired equipment must be cleared from the venue, and prepared for return. Notices which have been put up need to be taken down. Furniture might need to be put back into its usual place. Tech equipment needs to be taken apart, and returned.

We had not planned for that.

There is also financial work to do, and formal thanks to be sent to those who have earned it. We think it is always helpful to review how things worked and in future this could include a survey, which might have been done prior to the closing of the event.