

## **Epistles and reports from BYM representatives attending other European Yearly Meetings in 2023**

Friends appointed to attend in 2023 are shown below. This paper includes reports received so far – a revised version will be made available when all reports have been received.

- Belgium and Luxembourg YM – Jane Harries, South Wales AM / CCR De Cymru
- Finland YM – Mary Woodward, South East Scotland AM
- France YM – Tricia Bridgewater, North Wales AM / CCR Gogledd Cymru
- German YM – Till Geiger, East Cheshire AM
- Ireland YM – Gordon Benson, Pendle Hill AM and Derek McLean, North Scotland AM
- Netherlands YM Epistle
- Norway YM – Alastair Thomas, Lancashire Central & North AM
- Sweden YM – John Phillips, South East Scotland AM
- Switzerland YM – Annie Brock Womack, Sheffield & Balby AM

### **Belgium and Luxembourg**

9–11 June 2023, Chant d'Oiseau, Brussels



*The gardens at Chant d'Oiseau*

'Searching for Unity in Turbulent Times – from our Testimonies to Corporate Faith in Action'

#### **Introduction**

The annual gathering of Friends in Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting took place at Chant d'Oiseau, Brussels over the weekend of 9–11 June. Chant d'Oiseau is home to a Franciscan convent, but is also a centre for seminars and retreats, situated in beautiful gardens on the outskirts

of Brussels – an ideal place for worship, discernment, community and reflection. We were blessed with beautiful weather over the weekend, which meant we were able to take advantage of the grounds during some of our sessions. Thirty Friends gathered to take part in the weekend, including representatives from Britain Yearly Meeting, the Netherlands and EMES. This being the second year we had attended Belgium

and Luxembourg YM, we quickly renewed acquaintances and settled into being part of the community for the weekend.

### **The theme and shape of the weekend**

The theme for the weekend was **‘Searching for Unity in Turbulent Times – from our Testimonies to Corporate Faith in Action’**. This was a relevant theme for various reasons. The war in Ukraine has raised issues for our Peace Testimony in terms of what we can say and do, individually and corporately, in times of conflict. Emerging from COVID and in the context of economic inequalities, Friends are considering what community means and how this has been and is being impacted, both internally and in the societies we live in. The planning group explained some of the thinking behind the weekend at the beginning of the gathering. What does it mean to ‘stand with one foot in the kingdom of this world and with the other in the Eternal Kingdom’ (QF&P 23.04, Eva I Pinthus, 1987)? With the Testimonies as our guide, how are we called to act, individually and corporately? The aim of the weekend was to explore these questions, but also to take Friends on a journey which enabled them to experience individual and corporate discernment, resulting in a clearer understanding of what the Yearly Meeting is called to do together.

### **Our Speaker, Sister Marianne Goffoël**

The choice of Soeur Marianne Goffoël as our main speaker was inspirational. During her talk, which was entitled ‘One Foot in the Kingdom of this World and the other in the Eternal Kingdom’ she illustrated through her own life story how being in this world but not of the world has led her, as a Dominican nun, to a life directed by openings and characterised by service. Her life journey took her from Belgium to Algeria, to Iraq and back to Belgium, where she worked first at the El Kalima Centre, a Christian centre for relations with Islam and now in one of Flanders’ ‘béguinages’, spiritual communities for lay religious women.

Some of the insights she shared regarding her journey were as follows:

- Serving is fundamental to life as a Christian;
- Being open to the Spirit is risky and can take us in unexpected directions!
- Dominicans examine the contemporary world in order to identify the challenges of the present time, which are constantly changing;
- True dialogue begins with life and is the fruit of a long ‘living together’ and or shared concerns;
- To truly understand the other, you need to listen but also to understand their language, both linguistically and spiritually (Sister Goffoël spent two years studying Arabic and Islamology.)
- Faith should lead to practical action. For Marianne this has led to her helping Iraqis affected by the Gulf Wars and DAESH – also since her return to Belgium.

## Looking at the SPICES and what we are led to do

Belgium and Luxembourg Friends refer to the Testimonies as the SPICES (Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Sustainability). On the Saturday afternoon we split into small groups, according to which of the 'SPICES' spoke to us and undertook a preliminary process of sharing and discernment.

In these smaller groups we were asked to share two experiences where we were confronted by this particular Testimony in our daily lives and conversations, then to explore the differences between these experiences and whether there was a common concern the group would like to look at in more depth. For these common concerns we were asked to explore what the root cause of the problem is and what kind of actions we could support.

The small group explorations were followed by a Plenary Session where we shared **key points** which emerged from our discussions. For the group looking at **Community** the idea of upholding one another was important. We need to accept what is and that building community is always work in progress. The group who considered **Peace** noted how the narrative in society changes when war actually occurs – also that we don't really talk about pacifism in Quakers and what non-violent responses might look like. Possible actions might be to hold a discussion day or to support Conscientious Objectors. The **Simplicity** group felt that this testimony is strongly linked to Sustainability and Peace. Simplicity touches every aspect of our daily lives but is also about spiritual simplicity. **Integrity** was identified as being about honesty and having strong moral values. The group asked 'How do we know when we're acting with integrity?' For the group looking at **Equality**, the basis of this Testimony is 'that of God in everyone'. It's also about power and privilege and naming invisible walls.

This initial exploration and discernment was followed on the Sunday morning by a worship sharing and **collective discernment** session. Friends shared their own experiences of discernment and considered the following questions:

1. How do we uphold Friends in their individual concerns?
2. What are our collective concerns, and how do we take them forward?

The importance of upholding Friends acting under concern was shared, as expressed in *Advices and Queries* 36 – also the importance of waiting in the Light, taking small steps and checking. It was felt that sometimes Friends may need to be more vocal about wanting to be upheld, and that there are different ways of being faithful to our testimonies, with some being more comfortable with being 'servants rather than saviours.'

## Collective Discernment – Action on Conscientious Objectors

Earlier in the gathering we had heard of the way the Ghent Worshipping Group had discerned their response to the war in Ukraine. This involved the whole meeting in

collectively writing an opinion piece about Conscientious Objectors and working with the European Bureau for Conscientious Objectors (EBCO) to support COs in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. Following on from the collective discernment on the Sunday morning, a minute was agreed during the final Meeting for Worship for Business supporting the work of the Ghent group and asking them to bring a statement the next BLYM meeting in September so that this could become a collective concern of the Yearly Meeting.

## **Community and Conflict**

It's interesting that, for Belgium and Luxembourg Friends (as for all of us) Community sits in the middle of the SPICES (Testimonies). We bring our insights and concerns to the community of our Meetings, also our blind spots and weaknesses. Ideally Community should provide us with a safe space where we feel heard and understood and are able to go back out into the world strengthened and supported. It involves seeing and being seen (and heard) by others and accepting what is. For Belgium and Luxembourg Friends it's also about coming from quite different cultures and linguistic backgrounds.

During the meeting we experienced a painful reminder of what happens to community when long-running tensions and conflicts aren't resolved. Conflict erupted after the initial Meeting for Worship on the Saturday morning, and the Clerks quite rightly responded by holding a worship-sharing session which enabled Friends to express strong feelings and thoughts about building community. Some reflections from this session are encapsulated in the Yearly Meeting Epistle, including the recognition that being in community always implies a degree of tension and conflict. A useful image was that of the skier who, when skiing down a slope, focuses not on the trees (the obstacles) but on the open spaces in-between (the opportunities).

Likewise, Belgium and Luxembourg YM moves forwards in faith, seeking opportunities for community and corporate action, whilst being sensitive to the different perspectives, attitudes and cultures that make up the whole.

## **Conclusion**

Our final Meeting for Worship was held under a tree in the wonderful Chant d'Oiseau gardens. We were joined during worship by two young women whose parents had been saved by Quakers in Southern France during the Spanish Civil War, and who then took part in the Kindertransport. This was a



*A BYM Friend enjoys the Chant d'Oiseau gardens*

moving reminder of how our corporate faith in action has positive repercussions which are felt even today.

I am hugely grateful for having had this opportunity to attend Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting for a second consecutive year. It has enabled me to build real connections with and understanding of that Yearly Meeting, which I hope to maintain into the future.

Jane Harries  
South Wales AM / CCR De Cymru

**Epistle from the Belgium and Luxemburg Yearly Meeting 2023 annual gathering** held at Chant d'Oiseau, Brussels, Belgium 09-11 June 2023

**Searching for unity in turbulent times – from our testimonies to corporate Faith in Action**

To Friends Everywhere,

We met over the sunny weekend of 9–11 June 2023 at Chant-d'Oiseau in Brussels. Our theme was “Searching for Unity in Turbulent Times - from our Testimonies to Corporate Faith in Action”. Thirty Friends were present, three of whom were from The Netherlands and Britain Yearly Meeting, EMES, plus our speaker Sister Marianne Goffoël.

**Guest Speaker**

We heard an inspiring speech. Sister Marianne Goffoël told us about her life and work as a Dominican nun. Her story took us from her formative years in 1950s Brussels, to Algeria and then Iraq, where she lived for many years and learned that true dialogue begins with sharing lived experience and concerns.

Sister Marianne also shared reflections about the Catholic Church and Islam, and the “occasional tensions between heaven and earth” she witnessed in her life. Believers must be connected to both heaven and earth, she told us. So faith in the hereafter should not lead to indifference or demobilisation in the face of the world's problems, but on the contrary to commitment to the service of human beings, especially the most disadvantaged.

She took the name Marianne Ibrahim to signify that she would follow Abraham in leaving their homeland to follow God's instruction to go among other nations.

For the last 27 years, Sister Marianne has also been much involved in the Centre El Kalima in Brussels, a centre for Christian-Muslim relations.

## **Conflict**

We have once again considered the tensions and conflicts in our meeting. We shifted our agenda to respond to the issues and held a worship sharing session. Both longstanding Friends and newcomers spoke about conflict and community building.

The earlier attempts to find solutions have not borne fruit and have left us with pain and damaged relationships. Perhaps we must accept that being in community always implies a degree of tension and conflict. We have been reminded that it is best not to focus on the problem as we move forward, but rather to aim for the space of opportunity on either side.

When skiing in the forest in wintertime, it's better to focus on the spaces between the trees rather than the trees themselves. We have been given another image of what might be our goal: a tree that, as it has grown over the years, has partially enveloped the iron fencing on both its sides so that finally they form one body.

## **Back to our agenda**

We explored our Quaker testimonies or "SPICES" in small groups. We shared our individual experiences with each other and started to seek what might lead us into collective understanding and action.

As a whole group, we explored Friends experience of peace work. We heard how Ghent Worship Group discerned their response to the war in Ukraine, which involved the entire meeting in collectively writing an opinion piece about Conscientious Objectors and working with the European Bureau for Conscientious Objectors (EPCO BEOC), to support Conscientious Objectors in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. We will consider if this concern to support Conscientious Objectors from these countries can be similarly adopted for our whole Yearly Meeting.

## **In conclusion**

Although all of our sessions varied in content and approach, each has served to remind us that very different structures and attitudes can meet and embrace each other and yet retain their individual character, and at the same time respect the different nature of the other.

(We hope that this can finally be the case with our meeting.)

Signed in and on behalf of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly meeting, 11 June 2023  
Ruth Harland, Clerk

Submitted by epistle drafting committee of Eoin Dubsy, Phil Gaskell, Nick Rendle, Emmanuelle Verhagen

## Finland Yearly Meeting

3–5 March 2023, AitO Centre, outside Tampere

Finland Yearly Meeting was able to gather in person for the first time since the pandemic in the autumn of last year, and I joined them online for their first evening. I was delighted to be asked to attend Finland YM this spring, having kept in contact since my visit in 2019.

During lockdown, Finnish Quakers began meeting one Sunday a month using Zoom and later added a second Sunday meeting and some weekday evening ones. Helsinki and Tampere meetings have resumed face-to-face meetings and the twice-monthly Sunday zoom meetings continue. These are attended both by isolated Quakers and those who also attend their local meetings. Some new people have joined on-line worship, and Quakers in other countries also join from time to time, the most regular ones being myself and a young woman who had been living in Finland but is now in Sweden.

There are now some 25 Friends in membership in Finland, and 50-70 attenders. Tampere meeting in particular has gained a number of new attenders, while a Friend who lives near Oulu (about half-way up the country) has recently had several enquiries about joining the on-line Meetings for Worship. She hopes to be able to arrange an in-person meeting in the coming months.

The weekend followed a very familiar pattern and made sure that no-one was excluded language-wise. Many Finns are equally comfortable in Finnish and English and will translate their own contribution: others are less comfortable using English, while other Friends' first language is English. There has always been a tradition of ensuring that what is said is accessible to all. The business on Saturday was conducted [as is usual] solely in Finnish, with whispered translation by a neighbour for those needing it.

Much of the business was 'standard'. I was interested to learn of the continuing progress of the group dealing with archive material which was set up at my first FYM. Following the deaths of some long-standing and deeply loved members of the Yearly Meeting, a small group was set up to assemble information to help Friends who might be involved with or responsible for planning funerals. Three leaflets, in English and in Finnish, were being prepared: suggestions for opening and closing remarks for a service; elements to take into consideration in planning the service; and a leaflet explaining Quaker history and how Quakers fit into the wider ecumenical family in Finland.

There was discussion around how to retain memories of those Friends who have died – currently there are no records held. Memorial minutes would be good – perhaps they could go on Finnish Friends' website, both as a record of people's lives and as a form of outreach. Should there be a funerals committee, to take the burden

off the executive committee who 'keep things running' in between the twice-yearly Gatherings? Perhaps such a committee could also help with arranging other events and celebrations? Finland YM is keen to avoid unnecessary committee burdens – but this committee suggestion arises from a concern within its members.

There was also a growing concern for our earth: Finland has an increasing number of cattle, which means an increase in the amount of methane produced. Consideration of reparations for flights undertaken on FYM business, which had been talked of in previous years, was revisited.

During the weekend I read out BYM's letter of greeting, which was well received.

Running through the weekend was a consideration of elämänvoima – life force. What things nurture this life force, both in individuals and in society as a whole? What things drain it? How can we protect it in ourselves when we feel others are draining it from us? Much of what was said resonated deeply with me and inspired me to minister later in the weekend.

I was too tired to join Saturday early evening's musical sharing but was extremely glad to join the women's time in the sauna, alternating with cooling sessions in the adjacent swimming pool. It was a wonderful time of sharing and bonding which I really miss when I get back to Scotland! After sauna I felt, again, that I needed quiet time, and joined a small group in the dining room, getting to know them and compare/ share experiences.

After our last meal together, we shared our final thoughts on the weekend before setting off in our different directions: in my case, to spend a couple of days with my nieces in Jyväskylä. I parted from Friends old and new, in equal measure exhausted and elated and already looking forward to joining them again in October. I had had the opportunity to share a little about my work on the Book of Discipline Committee, and to talk about my Quaker experience with some of the people new to Quakers. I was also greatly encouraged by everyone's positive reactions to my attempts to speak Finnish.

I am always glad of opportunities to engage in conversations around 'being and doing Quaker' and had many such conversations over the weekend and later when one of the Tampere Quakers came to spend time with me in Helsinki. I hope to raise sufficient funds to attend the Finns' autumn gathering and will visit individual Friends where possible – I already have one invitation, and hope for more.

I will continue to join Finnish Sunday worship whenever I can, and to foster the good relationships I have made with so many Finns. I give their loving greetings to the various Meetings for Worship I attend in the UK and enjoy sharing my experience of visiting Finland YM and encouraging others to experience the amazing gift of being a guest at another Yearly Meeting. I took part in a zoom conversation with BYM



visitors/visitees in March and will make a point of looking out for overseas visitors at BYM in April.

I am very grateful for my appointment to visit Finland YM – I have made many friends, been welcomed into the Finnish Quaker family, and keep learning from my ongoing relationship with them.

No epistle was written at the Yearly Meeting.

Mary Woodward  
South East Scotland AM

### **Finland Yearly Meeting Clerk, Toni Hämäläinen's words accompanying the circulated minutes and reports from Yearly Meeting 2023**

3-5 March 2023 AitO centre, near Tampere

Viime viikonloppuna saimme AitO-keskuksessa nauttia hyvästä seurasta, jaetusta hiljaisuudesta ja herkullisesta ruoasta, muun muassa. "Elämänvoima"-kevätkokouksemme oli varmasti kaikille osallistujille antoisa ja voimauttava. Minulle tämä tämä viikonloppu oli henkilökohtaisesti merkittävä, sillä olin ensimmäistä kertaa työhartauskokouksemme kirjuriina. Tästä jäi minulle kiitollinen olo. Meitä oli monta paikalla ja saimme yhdessä todeta, että vuosikokouksemme on kehittyvä ja elinvoimainen Ystävien yhteisö. Olemme myös osa kansainvälistä kveekariliikettä ja -henkeä.

Ihanaa kevättä kaikille! Luottakaamme Valoon, elämään.

Translation courtesy of GoogleTranslate with a little tweaking for the Quaker terms

Last week at the AitO centre we were able to enjoy good company, shared silence and delicious food, among other things. Our "Life force" spring gathering was certainly rewarding and empowering for all participants. This weekend was personally significant for me, as I was the clerk of our meeting for worship for business for the first time. This left me feeling grateful. There were many of us there and together we could say that our annual meeting is a developing and vibrant community of Friends. We are also part of the international Quaker movement and spirit.

Have a wonderful; spring everyone! Let us trust in Light, in life.

## France Yearly Meeting

27–30 October 2023, Angers

### **Report from the Assemblée Annuelle de France, October 27th – 30th 2023**

We met in Angers, on the Loire, in a centre called Ethic Etapes, Lac de Maine, located in a park beside a huge lake, close to the city. It was a lovely venue but persistent rain rather put a dampener on venturing out much. I really appreciated having been able to return for second time to France Yearly Meeting. This time I was a bit more familiar with what to expect of the weekend and it was lovely to catch up with French, English and American Friends I had met the year before.

This weekend was structured and very well organised. There were two gatherings – one face to face and one online and we joined up from time to time. The technology was better and it felt more inclusive to the 20 or so Friends in the online gathering. We started by being introduced to both the programme and each other, which was very welcome, being something of an outsider.

During the weekend we had lots of down time as well as programmed activities, so there was plenty of opportunity get to know each other better and to talk about topics like asylum seekers, climate change and AI from a French perspective. The queue for the servery and the way the tables were laid out encouraged us to talk to and sit with different people for every meal, which was a real gift for me.

We were about 40 Friends for each face to face session, with most people staying at the centre. This year, we had more young people with us – many of whom were leading parts of the programme – and a children's meeting. So age-wise we were more diverse than last year, with many more young families. We had some Friends with us who spoke no English and many more French Quakers than last year, so the programme was entirely in French. In fact only one Friend (who was from Germany) needed translation and that was arranged by having a helpful Friend sitting next to her for each session and providing summary translation.

The programme was run entirely by Friends themselves with simple but effective activities on themes such as 'how we build in the spirit', 'cultivating our community', ..... We were also given some scenarios which could lead to conflict in meetings and asked how we might tackle them 'in right ordering'. This provoked a lot of thought, discussion, soul searching as well as much laughter. Saturday night was an evening of entertainment and we were treated to performances, played games, danced and did silly things to make each other giggle. It was a lovely, fun evening.

During the weekend we had reports on the previous year from each of the 5 'local' groups. All are meeting regularly and seem vibrant, with membership totalling 110 at present. Some only meet online, like the Amis Isolés and the Nouvelle Aquitaine groups who are geographically very spread out. Some meet together once a month and some more frequently, sometimes in each other's homes. Only two groups have

buildings – Paris (soon to be purchased) and Languedoc who meet in Congénies, France's only purpose-built meeting house and residential centre. Reports covered all the usual expected items – money, membership, buildings - but as many groups had no buildings, theirs were very much about the community and their life in the spirit. Discussions on subjects of concern figured often, as well as how to ensure their business is being conducted in right ordering, with few 'weighty quakers' among them.

We also heard from the Communications and Outreach committee who really seem to have done a lot in the past year to link people together, to make information about the Quaker community available to all and to encourage interest in Quakerism. This includes a Facebook page with information about the groups and a glossary of Quaker terms, Twitter (X), blogs, a new banner, new leaflets and they are developing a podcast. They had received funding from the EMES 'Spiritual Growth Fund' for some translation for these.

Many of the activities took the form of worship sharing either in small groups or all together in the large group. One asked us to consider what question would inspire us, when welcoming someone to meeting for the first time. Ambiguous as the topic was, it led to a very creative session with many different interpretations of the question and varying viewpoints. What began in confusion turned out to be inspired. We considered what it was that we and others are looking for when we / they first come to meeting. A safe place, relationships, a spiritual home, other searchers, people with open minds who don't judge, a community to which to belong? Also what do we have to offer? Is the Quaker meeting right for them or will they continue on their search? And why are we Quakers?

Another was focussed on the future of their community. I offered an image we had used in Wales of a tree representing our community and they embraced this and took it further to include neighbouring trees, the rest of the forest and the climate. Contributions considered the roles of the young as well as the old, the importance of a strong spirituality being at the heart of the community and knowing each other well.

We were challenged on a number of occasions about our assertion that all were welcome at a Quaker Meeting – how do we feel about evangelical Christians joining us? What about joint bible study groups? How diverse are we (not very!) and what does that say about how welcoming we actually are?

On the Sunday afternoon we heard reports from visitors, including from me. We heard from EMES, Germany Yearly Meeting and QCEA. I gave recent news of Quakers in Britain and spoke also about the simplification process we are undertaking at the moment in Wales.

As last year, the AAF weekend started with the CAR – the Conseil d'Administration Représentatif (business meeting) and ended with the Assemblée Générale – France's equivalent of an AGM, which they have to have to fulfil their legal

requirements. During a finance summary which was funny, mostly pictorial and very short (all of these being a welcome surprise) we were informed that the account was now (practically) in the black, as opposed to a red balance of late. They are looking for ways to fund raise for Congénies, but options are limited because they could only receive money from donations, legacies and fees from people attending the centre. One idea was to try to get more French people to go to Congénies, the vast majority at the moment being English speakers.

I was interested to note that Quakers in France do not seem to have the freedom we do in Britain to issue statements about what is going on in our country (or abroad) on behalf of the Quaker community. In fact as a religious organisation they do not seem to have a public platform at all, as their constitution prevents them from speaking out about political topics. This came up in relation to the situation in Gaza, as well as a recent protest against the arms trade which had been blocked by President Macron. However the new company they have created in order to purchase and manage the new Paris meeting house has a different constitution as it is a 'cultural' organisation and this organisation does issue a regular newsletter in which it can broach social as well as political topics. So they are making the most of this opportunity.

Throughout the weekend, it felt like I was among a community with real energy and enthusiasm behind it, that was moving forwards with hope and confidence. I was again struck by similarities between the Quaker communities in France and in Wales, in our bilingualism, our energy and creativity, our moving forward optimistically into a new era as well as our also being a little more distant from the 'central operations' at the Friends House headquarters in London.

Tricia Bridgewater

### **France YM Epistle**

Dear Friends from near and far,

A cold, driving rain welcomed the members of our community - 60 adults and 7 children, including Friends representing European countries - who came to meet at Ethic Étape in Angers from October 27 to 30, 2023. Heavy rain, certainly necessary for nature, did not prevent us from reuniting with joy, warmth and fellowship around the theme: "Welcoming, creating a community, and building the future together". Better mastery of technology enabled us to welcome 12 friends from afar.

The positive evolution of our community is also due to our mastery of digital tools, useful not only for linking us to each other, but also for increasing our visibility among the curious, and potential new Quakers?

- The theme of welcoming has been a common thread running through our workshops. But what does it mean to welcome?  
Welcoming means providing the codes needed to understand the sometimes complex workings of the business for beginners.

- Welcoming means not imprisoning oneself in rules that one imagines to be necessary to function, but opening oneself to others, listening to them, smiling at them, and perhaps more, if one feels so inclined.
- Welcoming means accepting that everyone's presence is free, and sometimes that it's just one way among many.

Questions arose about the definition and challenges of community. The best definition we all came up with is that our community is part of a network of links, a weaving together of ourselves, the world around us and nature.

In the face of the various challenges faced by the groups that make up our community, it seems obvious that the latter must reinvent itself on a daily basis, adapting to linguistic and cultural constraints and thus contributing to the formation of a French-style Quaker sensibility.

The future of our community and the constant search for respect for our values contribute to our desire to make ourselves more visible and take advantage of today's technology by offering a wide range of communication media.

The intergenerational exchange that took place throughout the weekend reinforced the respective roles of the younger and older members of the group, whose priorities, although slightly different at this particular moment, remain motivated by values that are more than ever common to all, and which must be put at the service of the thirst for action expressed (prepare for a big change).

And then there were the many who raised the need to find a stable, strong structure to move forward, a skilful blend of past and present, a nourishing framework for a secure future, as evidenced by the fresco created by the children.

On this Sunday, beyond our effervescent brains, we're just wondering how we can take home the convivial festivities, the joyful laughter, the invigorating exchanges, the benevolent energy and the Spirit present among us.

## **Ireland Yearly Meeting**

13–16 April 2023, The Dominican Retreat Centre, Tallaght, Dublin.

This was my first visit to Dublin and only my second to Ireland.

The start of Ireland Yearly Meeting (IYM) coincided with the visit of President Biden to Ireland on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, which made travel through the city difficult.

The venue was the Dominican Retreat Centre, Tallaght, Dublin. Approximately 130 members and attenders came over the three days with 30 of those staying on site. The remainder were either day visitors or stayed in one of the nearby hotels.

Most sessions were 'blended', attendance being in person or online. The Special Interest Groups were between 9th and 12th April and were held on Zoom with follow up sessions on the Friday, held in person.

Whilst IYM is a small meeting of approximately 1500 members and several hundred attenders, it is the second largest in the Friends World Council for Consultation, Europe and Middle East Section. Being a small meeting it gave me plenty of opportunity to meet Quakers from different parts of the country on different spiritual journeys.

The theme for this year's meeting was, Building Community Together.

Each day began with a choice of early morning activities in person including bible study, worship sharing and meeting for worship for healing and each day ended with candlelit worship.

I attended two of the four special interest groups.

Firstly, 'The Goffs of Horetown'. Claire Bradley, a professional genealogist, gave a presentation about a 'typical' Quaker family in the 19th century. This included a brief history of Friends in Ireland which I found interesting.

Secondly, 'Quakers and a Peace Testimony – an Exploration', which outlined our peace testimony and its history.

This inspired testimony from the attendees around the present situation in the world. Peace and community became central to our ministries throughout our weekend.

### **Connecting Communities**

The first session was Connecting Communities. Five speakers addressed various issues from connecting communities, including connecting our church communities in the aftermath of the pandemic, to fostering community through Inter Church and Interfaith work.

### **Running our Community: Finances and Reports**

The second session on Friday was Running our Community: Finances and reports, which started Opening Meeting for Worship. The reports of the various Friends' committees and the nominations to various local and international Quaker and ecumenical bodies were accepted.

The treasurer gave the financial report, which was the main agenda item of this session. Whilst investments were down slightly and there was a small deficit in the main budget overall, IYM is in a financially healthy position. The Yearly Meeting is funded by a levy on each Meeting. IYM has, in the past, supported Meetings with the levy through a subsidy of 25% from central funds, However, with concern about

inflation, Meetings are being asked to pay the full levy when they are able with the intention of the YM living within its budget.

It was decided to look again at the incorporation of IYM as this would give protection to the Trustees.

### **Special Interest Groups Follow ups**

#### **A conversation about food and the food system**

The earlier Zoom session focused on Food Waste and the fact that some countries were taking the matter seriously. In the follow up session, sell by dates and pre-packaging were issues that were discussed. One Friend had shocked colleagues by eating a yoghurt found in the fridge that was about a month past its sell by date. She had survived with no ill effects!

#### **Quaker Community Past and Present**

There were eight representatives from eight other countries including Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM). The Assistant Clerk welcomed those attending from other Yearly Meetings, Quaker organisations, ecumenical and interfaith groups.

Four letters of greeting were read out including the letter of greeting from BYM, which was read out by Derek McLean.

#### **The Community of Early Quakers – Stuart Masters (Woodbrooke)**

Stuart Masters, from Woodbrooke, gave a talk on the Community of early Quakers.

Stuart gave a brief history of the early Friends and the community that they became.

Quakers believed that the inner light was within us all and that “God has now come to dwell in all of his people”. The community of Quakers was “to know one another in the things that are eternal” “We are the body of Christ each with diverse gifts”

How well do we know each other today?

#### **Working for Justice and Peace in a Time of Climate Crisis – Tracy Martin (Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA))**

QCEA is a small Quaker organisation based in Brussels and it has four members of staff. The focus of their work is to live our peace testimony, through three areas of work:

- Migration
- Climate crisis and its effect on peace
- Transformative dialogue.

#### **Exploring Community Together**

Friends could explore community together through either an art workshop, reflective poetry, life reflections or international folk dancing, which is the one I attended.

We did a number of dances from various countries and Denise gave a brief introduction to each.

I found the session both spiritual and fun.

### **The Public Lecture**

Hospitality and the Pilgrim: a Quaker's reflection on communion and community – Harvey Gillman

The lecture was available in person and via a separate webinar Zoom link.

The Public Lecture, the IYM equivalent of the Swarthmore lecture, was given by Harvey Gillman, an author who has written widely on Quakerism. It is available on You Tube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzoqesX29fA> The script of his lecture is available on IYM website [www.quakers.ie](http://www.quakers.ie)

The brief introduction to Harvey Gilman on You Tube gives a good idea of the themes he raised:

*“Harvey (who describes himself as a seeker, finder, explorer, discoverer, dissident, exile, would-be poet and heretic!) sees every human being as a pilgrim. “We look for meaning, a sense of belonging and a way to act in the world which seem true to our experiences”; he says. “The self, the other, and the world itself are inter-related. How do we forge links in a world that often seems to pull us apart?” Harvey, who was brought up in the Jewish tradition and joined Quakers as an adult, says he has always desired the constancy of community and that Friends/Quakers offered him the hospitality he was looking for and a space in which to breathe”.*

### **Preparing for Peace**

#### **How can we prepare for peace – Ian Atack (Irish School of Ecumenics, Retired)**

The weekend marked the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday agreement. Quakers have been involved with a number of projects to promote peace, some supported by BYM. However these have been scaled back or ended.

Quakers support the Downpatrick declaration which supports the upholding of section 29 of the Irish constitution and opposes the growth of the arms trade in Ireland which is being promoted by the Irish government.

Friends were concerned about the increase of militarisation in Irish society including the growth of the arms trade in the Republic. Already there are over 500 companies in Ireland manufacturing or developing military or dual use technologies. Ireland should be promoting swords into ploughshares. We should be preparing for peace and not war.

#### **Florence Foster – Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) Geneva**

Florence outlined what they did to promote peace within the UN. Their role is to bring diplomats and academics and others working on various diplomatic issues together.



All their programmes are concerned preparing for peace, including climate change, immigration, arms control and corporate responsibility.

**Pleasurance Perry** told the meeting of her experience of hosting a family of Ukrainian refugees (there are over 75,000 Ukrainian refugees in Ireland) and others shared their own stories of hosting. Also, in the UK, Lincoln AM provides a space for Ukrainians to meet.

The Clerk decided to rearrange the timetable of the meeting to allow for more ministry as peace was much in the minds of Friends.

### **Our Young People's Community**

There were a series of reports back from the various young people's meetings focusing on Community.

Young Friends called for the reinstatement of the youth support worker post for the 14 to 18 age group.

### **Meet with our speakers**

#### **Tracy Martin QCEA**

Tracy explained the role of the QCEA which was to promote Quaker testimonies within various European bodies including the Council of Europe (European Declaration of Human Rights) and the European Union. They have four members of staff, now full time employees, working on different projects.

Ministry from Friends suggested that IYM needs to provide more financial support to Quaker international organisations.

#### **Social evening**

We began to relax as it came towards the end with a pub style quiz devised by the Assistant Clerk which was tough but fun. I was lucky enough to be on the winning team.

#### **Closing Session**

Denise Gabuzda, the Clerk of IYM 2023, read out the epistle, which referred to the main theme of the Meeting, Building Communities, which included Peace, Social Media, Young Friends, Community and the public lecture given by Harvey Gillman.

#### **My Closing Reflections**

Quakers are about journeys and stories, not creeds and doctrine.

This was reflected in the Meeting, from our early stories and the beliefs which formed the early community of Friends to the seeking and discovering experienced by Quakers today.

The community of Friends has changed over the centuries but it remains anchored by its method of worship.

Whilst similar in format to Britain Yearly Meeting, the fact that IYM is a lot smaller makes it feel quite different, more relaxed and Friendly.

I really enjoyed my first visit to IYM and I felt spiritually uplifted by the experience and hope to return next year.

Gordon Benson  
Pendle Hill AM

### **Report on Ireland Yearly Meeting held in Dublin 13–16 April 2023** Building Community Together

*...let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*  
- Hebrews 10:24

It was a privilege to attend a second Ireland Yearly Meeting this time in West Dublin in the Dominican Retreat Centre in Tallaght. There was the pleasure in meeting familiar Friends from IYM in Belfast last year and many conversations with new Friends. The Centre has a huge walled garden with very mature trees and I enjoyed the solitude walking there at different times of day.

There were several themes which recurred throughout the weekend: renewal and spiritual renewal, the legacy of the pandemic, peace-making and peace building, inter-church and inter-faith encounter.

Again this was a very intimate and relaxed YM with around 80 Friends present and other Friends joining via zoom. Irish Friends gave a warm welcome to representatives from the UK and several European countries, and from the US and Canada.

I'm reporting on the sessions which I found of interest, most! Full information is available on the Ireland Yearly meeting website.

**Quaker Connections.** Shane Whelan described the work Quaker Service is carrying out in prisons through the Quaker Connections programme. Volunteer led, the programme offers befriending to primarily men receiving few or no visitors. Male prisoners on release are supported by circles of support to help them rebuild their lives. In Maghaberry an anti-violence programme is established and there have been discussions with women at Hydebank to better understand the links between homelessness and the criminal justice system. Alternatives to Violence Project are trying to get into the women's prison. But the increase in prisoners and severe staff shortages have caused problems for the programme.

**Our Church Communities in the Aftermath of the Pandemic.** Ruth Garvey Williams spoke of her experiences of travelling all round Ireland speaking to Christians from all denominations asking 'What is God doing in Ireland?' The same themes emerged from different interfaith groups: churches need to break out of the

walls of their buildings to live out their witness; allow our Light to shine so that God's work is visible; embrace weakness with humility in deprived areas of cities; the need for Christian unity to overcome the divisions arising from women in ministry, immigration and responses to the LGBT community.

**Fostering Community through Inter-church and Inter-Faith encounter.** James Nelson has been the Quaker representative on the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Inter-Church Meeting and a member of the Northern Ireland inter-faith programme. He spoke of the impact of participating in educational opportunities to promote understanding between divided communities in his twenties and how he was encouraged to seek further ways to engage in ecumenical and interfaith work. He described three ways of being which foster community in inter-faith and inter-church activity:

**Be there**– Unless we put ourselves in the places where we can meet people from diverse traditions there will be no way to build connections.

**Be generous**– Focus on the positives of ecumenical encounters and be generous when faced with the negatives. Avoid assumptions and see beyond the 'label'.

**Be critical**– Constructive criticism helps build community by encouraging organisations to change and grow. Sitting at the same table doesn't necessarily mean a level playing field. We also need to think about who is inside and who is still outside the inter-church and inter-faith 'salad bowl' and ask why some churches and religious groups do not currently participate.

**Ministry and Oversight Session. Encouraging Spoken Ministry in Meetings for Worship.** Three Friends, one from each Quarterly Meeting took part in a panel to discuss how to encourage spoken ministry within our Meetings for Worship, reflecting a concern as to why there is a reluctance for Friends to share spoken ministry in meetings. One speaker quoted Thomas Kelly on the importance of developing our inner life so that we have something to say that is of God. Another that we need to listen to the still small voice within which will encourage us to share Ministry. In the following discussion Friends spoke of the deep value of silence, and of spoken ministry and the use of scripture.

**Epistles received.** A short report of the thirty or so Epistles received from other Yearly meetings over the past year highlighted the consequences of the pandemic, facing up to uncomfortable aspects of Quaker history, the challenge of acting for justice, maintaining our Peace Testimony in a time of war and concern for the environment

**The Community of Early Friends.** It was good to see Stuart Masters from Woodbrooke again on zoom talking about what inspired early Friends and the challenges they faced. He reminded us that the early Quaker movement had a powerful prophetic dimension challenging the injustices of their time and asked if we

were willing to listen to the prophets in our midst in our own times, particularly when they make us uncomfortable.

**Preparing for Peace.** Another concern which manifested over several sessions at IYM was peace making and peace building. Reflecting on the Quaker Peace Testimony, we heard how Quakers have responded differently to wars over the past century. While all Quakers are peace makers, not all are pacifists, and we rely as always on the Spirit and our conscience to guide us. It was accepted that the current war in Ukraine does not admit simple analysis but requires prayer and reflection and patience with one another. A practical solution which might be offered is to make refugees of whatever origin feel welcome and to work against a pernicious anti-immigrant culture, still small but vocal in Irish society.

We reflected on how we can prepare for peace, hearing about work to prevent increasing militarism, and campaigning against the arms industry. Florence Foster spoke about the peace building work of QUNO in Geneva. Friends also spoke of their experience hosting refugees from Ukraine. In discussion, we asked how Friends can help to create the conditions for peace in our own communities, with peace education programmes in schools and organising local events suggested.

**Hospitality and the Pilgrim** – a Quaker's reflection on communion and community Harvey Gilman gave an engaging talk exploring spirituality as a process of hospitality and told us that Quakers offered him the hospitality he was looking for and a space in which to breathe.

Three passages which spoke to me from a wide ranging talk were a quote from Parker J Palmer, the American Friend writing on community: *'In a true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives!'* (Faith & Practice 10.19); a reference to Lynn Finnegan's lecture in Belfast in August 2022:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope. She talks of the lonely place, the place of truth telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be... And she ends 'And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see ' She describes this as the tragic gap. The place of truth telling. In this sense we are Christ to each, Messiah, all anointed to the task of affirming, liberating each other; and Harvey's view that hospitality is for me a form of testimony, an outward sign of an inward grace. We are offering the home we have found and widening its boundaries to welcome others. This applies politically, economically and socially. It embodies our testimonies: equality: the other is as we are; peace: it offers a vision of how we

may live together; simplicity as our sharing requires only the unadorned gift of ourselves; and truthfulness as we can only offer what we really have and that demands a real recognition of who we are.

I left the conference with a heartfelt experience of the warmth of the community of Irish Friends, a community now emerging out of the experience of the pandemic in a spirit of renewal.

In the opening session John O'Donohue's poem For a New Beginning was read, a poem which describes the path towards renewal. I leave you with the last two verses:

Though your destination is not clear  
You can trust the promise of this opening;  
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning  
That is one with your life's desire.  
Awaken your spirit to adventure  
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk  
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm  
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

Derek McLean  
Dunblane Meeting

### **Ireland Yearly Meeting Epistle 2023**

To Friends Everywhere,

We send loving greetings from Ireland Yearly Meeting, held at the Dominican Retreat Centre in Tallaght, Dublin from April 13th-16th, 2023. The theme of this year's Yearly Meeting was Building Community Together. We were guided by the verse from Hebrews – *let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*

The community of Ireland Yearly Meeting could again be enjoyed not only by those who could travel to Dublin, but also by anyone with access to the internet. Friends from all over the world took the opportunity to come along, and some of our speakers joined us online. We heard about the inspiration and challenges faced by Early Friends. They developed strong bonds, due to a great sense of being gathered and held together by the living presence of Christ. Their communities were spiritually refreshed by Travelling Ministers, and Quaker preachers and writers were able to challenge the religious, political and economic injustices of the day in a clear and forceful way.

Too often today, Friends present themselves as a respectable and peaceful people who pose no threat. Modern Quakers may lack some of the prophetic zeal of those Early Friends, but we heard about Quakers who continue to push for change and to

address uncomfortable issues. Quaker Connections is a volunteer programme which works with isolated prisoners in Northern Ireland. In Europe, QCEA and QUNO ensure that migration, climate change and peace are kept at the top of discussion agendas.

Promoting and preparing for peace is still a crucially important topic, as the war in Ukraine and other global conflicts continue. Several speakers discussed peace - building carried out by various Quaker and other organisations. As Quakers, we are faced with the dilemma that we hold a variety of views of our Peace Testimony, and pacifism and prayer alone will not stop war.

One Quaker representative on inter-church and inter-faith bodies advised us that in order to foster community across difference we need to do three things – Be there, Be generous and Be critical. Another speaker promoted the need for Christian unity in her talk. Respectful, thoughtful engagement and listening without judgement are vital for building links between those of different denominations and different faiths.

We got excited about the expansion of Irish Quakers' social media presence, and the increase in the number of followers across all platforms shows it is providing a great form of outreach. The first series of Friendly podcasts has been listened to all over the world, acting as a valuable resource for the whole Quaker community, not just Irish Quakers. On Saturday we were joined by participants in the Children's programme, who shared their enthusiasm and artwork with us. Young Friends eloquently expressed their desire to have more opportunities to connect with those in their own age group, take more part in all-age gatherings, and learn more about the business of Yearly Meeting.

Our public speaker, Harvey Gillman, reflected on communion and community in a lecture entitled Hospitality and the Pilgrim. Harvey's various descriptions of himself as a restless nomad, a poet, a seeker, a finder and a linguist made for an entertaining deep exploration of the topic. Exiled from his childhood community, he eventually found his way to a Quaker meeting almost forty five years ago and felt at home. Hospitality for Harvey is a form of testimony, an outward sign of an inward grace, where you offer the home you have found and welcome others in. Spiritual hospitality is an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. Our lives and that of the earth are fragile, and we must love and nurture each other.

Signed on behalf of Ireland Yearly Meeting

Denise C Gabuzda, Clerk  
Pleasaunce M Perry, Asst. Clerk  
Hugh O'Farrell-Walsh, Asst. Clerk

## **Netherlands Yearly Meeting**

### **Epistle of Netherlands Yearly Meeting, 12–14 May 2023**

Dear Friends Worldwide

We met again in the Natuurvriendenhuis “de Bosbeek” in Bennekom with 54 Friends, including a number of children and guests from other Yearly Meetings (Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly Meeting, Ireland Yearly Meeting and German Yearly Meeting).

It was the first time in four years that we were able to meet, now that the threat of corona is over.

It was nice to be able to sit again at the table with one another and share soup and sandwiches with chocolate sprinkles.

What a wonderful privilege it was to be together in this wooded place with budding trees and bird sounds. On our walks we enjoyed the warmth of the sun and the sparkling sunlight and shadows on the leaves of the trees.

Our theme was “Ubuntu and Sustainability”, as a preparation for the theme of the World Conference 2024 in South Africa.

During the Meeting for Worship for Business, we reflected upon our finances and the question of whether we need professional assistance to make our tasks easier.

We want to develop a vision in the near future about what to do with our real estate.

We have also reflected on how to simplify our organizational structure and we hope to take steps towards this in the near future. We feel inspired by the experiences of Friends in Switzerland and Belgium.

We watched a dialogue between Lynn Finnegan (Ireland YM) and Kees Nieuwerth. The topic was: How do we relate to the threats of climate change and their impact on creation. Lynn quoted Rumi: “There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the earth”. This means that every person can contribute using their own talents. Lynn did research on hope and despair within the environmental movement. Her last question to Kees was where he gets his strength from and what he is grateful for. That is a question for all of us.

After this conversation Mieke van Opheusden presented her experiences with actions for the preservation of creation. She emphasized the great importance of resistance. She participated in an act of protest to stop a coal train by sitting on the rails, for which she was arrested. She also told us about the actions at the brown coal mine in Lützerath, Germany. It is like Mother Earth has been cut up with a big knife there.

Mieke shared her fear, anger and grief with us about how we as humanity are destroying God's creation. Grieving is an important process; if we don't grieve we become passive and depressive. This kind of mourning is too much for one person to bear, it needs a community.

She ended by naming her sources of strength, such as gratitude for what we still have, being in nature and celebrating life. She invited us to be still and ask ourselves, "What is required of me?"

The children really enjoyed being and playing in the woods. On Sunday, they practiced making fire without the use of matches and cooking soup on that fire made from plants found in the forest. The activity was organized by Wietske, who was specially invited to work with the children and offer them this experience.

We closed the weekend with our Meeting for Worship, which could also be attended digitally.

A song that inspired us and which we sang together was:

I've got peace like a river,  
I've got peace like a river,  
I've got peace like a river in my soul (2x)  
I've got strength like a mountain,  
I've got strength like a mountain,  
I've got strength like a mountain in my soul (2x)  
I've got love like a fountain,  
I've got love like a fountain,  
I've got love like a fountain in my soul (2x)

In Friendship

Peter Spreij  
Netherlands Yearly Meeting, Clerk.

## **Norway Yearly Meeting**

Norway Yearly Meeting took place in Kristiansand during 29 June to 2 July. It was held in the residential accommodation of Agder Folkehøgskole, one of 85 adult education centres catering especially for 18-20-year-olds looking for a 'year out' experience between school and university or work. Most students are from Norway but there are also a good number from abroad. Quakers had the college for the weekend. It is some 10 km outside the city of Kristiansand in southernmost Norway, with grounds looking out across a lake and woodlands towards the south coast and the sea. My wife (also a member of Preston local meeting) accompanied me; we



arrived in Kristiansand a few days early and were warmly welcomed by local Quakers Marit Zeiffert and Per Christian Aanensen.

It was a pleasure to be among welcoming Friends (ranging in age from 1 to the 80s), some of whom I already knew from the gathering of Quakers from Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland at Kungälv in Sweden in 2022. The weekend mixed opportunities to share in worship and business meetings. There was also plenty of time for social activities and walks in the surrounding woodlands or enjoy the calm of the open air and the countryside. All our food was vegetarian. One early morning a roe deer came to graze at the edge of the woodland.

The theme of the yearly meeting was “Living adventurously – together”. Proceedings began with a filmed interview with James Baldwin in Paris in the 1960s, posing questions about how well white people understood the extent to which black people (whether in France or USA) felt themselves to be at risk of racial discrimination and death. It was sad to reflect on how little had changed in the intervening half-century. A brief welcoming meeting for business was followed by an epilogue.

One speaker, Inge-Ma, told us about a visit to the South Hebron Hills and focussed on the work by EAPPI and the importance of using the Boycott Disinvestment and Sanctions movement to discourage Norwegian investment to exploit oil finds in West Bank Palestine, in the context of recent legislation by the Knesset to sanction the building of 5,000 new Israeli houses in settlements on Palestinian lands as a part of Israeli policies to dispossess and oppress the Palestinians.

The meeting also heard (in Norwegian) from Haldor Moxness, a professor of New Testament theology at Oslo University. He drew parallels from Paul’s letters to small congregations of Jewish Christians enjoining them to unity among themselves and to seek the new kingdom, to Quakers as a small and distinctive community seeking change in the world.

The Quaker Service Norway AGM reported on current work and finances and drew attention to a display of letters from children and families in Hamburg in the aftermath of World War II thanking Quakers for parcels of food and clothing.

In workshop discussions we were encouraged to share examples of rising to the personal challenge to “Live adventurously – together”. There was also time for a quiz in which two teams competed in their knowledge of Advices and Queries, including the ability to spot deliberate mistakes in some fanciful versions of real ones.

Norway yearly meeting had just published *Tro og Liv* (Faith and Life), its own 182-page edition of Quaker Faith and Practice. The book shares important parts of the content of the BYM volume, together with contributions from Norwegian Quakers, past and present. It aims to speak clearly for the Quaker belief in ‘that of God in everyone’, in contrast to the Lutheran emphasis on salvation through the atonement by Jesus for the sins of the world. Membership numbers have fallen; despite new

interest in Quakers made possible by Zoom meetings, valuable in the scattered locations imposed by Norway's extensive geography, it was commented that "Quakers do not reproduce biologically". So there was discussion of ways to give publicity to the new publication as a way to improve outreach and attract new interest.

Alastair Thomas

## **Sweden Yearly Meeting**

18–21 May 2023, Svartbäcken, near Rimbo

Sweden is a large country, about 1,000 miles long, 200 miles wide. It contains about 120 members of the Religious Society of Friends. Some live within one of the country's many urban centres, others live more remotely. The Society's website ([kvakare.se](http://kvakare.se)) indicates resources available throughout the whole country – detailed listings of in-person Meetings for Worship, resources for enquirers, contact email addresses for volunteers undertaking all sorts of work. But there is little doubt that community building is not easy.

There is normally an annual residential Yearly Meeting; this was suspended during the Corona epidemic, but re-constituted as a one-off pan-Nordic Meeting in 2022. The usual Yearly Meeting was resumed in 2023. Two further one-day business Meetings are held in the spring and autumn. The Yearly Meeting that my wife Kerstin and I attended hosted 25 Swedish Friends in Svartbäcken, a slightly remote retreat centre about 50 miles north of Stockholm, and a great place for Friends, new or long-standing, to meet up. The Meeting, the 89th YM of Swedish Friends, was to address how spiritual guidance can be provided in a country where most are unable to attend one-day business meetings or short courses.

### **The Yearly Meeting theme**

The theme of the Yearly Meeting was in fact "Svartbäcken, its history and legacy". There were five guests: myself and Kerstin, a representative of the European and Middle East Section of FWCC (EMES), and one each from Norway and Finland YMs. On each morning there was a Meeting for Worship for Business, at which Reports were heard and concerns were considered; in the afternoons and evenings there were special group meetings or presentations about items of interest.

On Friday afternoon Julia Ryberg, a staff member at Svartbäcken, gave us a fascinating introduction. The farm was originally purchased by her husband's father, but working the land had not been easy; he had become a Quaker in 1947 and after that the land and its surrounding buildings were adopted by Swedish Quakers in 1970 to use for meetings, retreats, summer camps for children and so on. New buildings were constructed to provide bedrooms, kitchen, washing facilities, library and a large meeting room. Particularly interesting was Julia's account of the housing

of the children of Assyrian refugees during the 1990s, when literally hundreds spent time there.

The managers of Svartbäcken had unearthed many examples of important historic newspaper articles from the 1950s and 1960s relating to Quakers, as well as old minutes of relevance: these had been posted on the walls for us to read, reflecting on how word about Quakers was spread in the past. Outreach is different today; enquirers can learn about Quaker witness from many sources. And of course, Meetings for Worship can even be joined remotely by Friends in different countries.

Swedish Friends are re-evaluating their Quaker organisation. Lectures and conferences can be made available using computer links, Meetings for Worship can be “blended” if carefully organised. Does one miss important contributions if one seeks to test a Quaker concern using a blended Meeting for Worship? Residential Meetings are greatly valued, but would attendance at these be reduced if distant members can join in remotely? And, should Friends invest in a paid post to deal with all the arrangements and organisation?

### **Special reports**

On the Thursday evening there was a presentation about the work of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) by a member of the Meeting who had served as a mentor for an international group that was there from November to January. We heard about the monitoring of the border crossings, about the irrational refusal of entry to Israel in spite of urgent appointments, and so on. The newly-constructed border wall prevents access to traditional lands, and sometimes Israeli aggression directed towards mosques makes life very difficult. However, there are groups of concerned Israeli citizens, giving some grounds for hope (though the situation has clearly worsened enormously since my own first introduction to EAPPI’s work).

Swedish Friends also support an active programme of overseas work: the underlying theme is educational, with emphasis on the importance of alternatives to violence. The geographical spread of the work is impressive, from Bangladesh to Zimbabwe and Burundi, from Georgia to Ramallah.

The first business session started with an introduction to all the “jobs” that have to be done, primarily the work of various committees. One could not help but reflect on our own BYM concern with “simpler Meetings”. The committee responsible for the annual YM Epistle requested guidance about conveying greetings from Swedish Friends versus reporting about the issues before the Yearly Meeting. Elders reported on their work to provide a version of Advices & Queries for use in Sweden, and the updating of the current Swedish version of Quaker faith & practice (familiar topics...). There were some membership issues, including Memorial Minutes.

A report from the annual meeting of EMES inevitably brought our attention back to issues around refugees and asylum seekers, the role of the Quaker United Nations

Office, and the situation in Ukraine. The peace committee had focussed on this during 2022, a year when Sweden was re-evaluating its relationship to NATO, and many Quakers were looking once again at their pacifist testimonies.

It was a privilege for us to meet with Swedish Quakers just after our own Britain Yearly Meeting had been held in London. While those present were well able to speak in English, all meetings and informal conversations were in Swedish and both myself and my wife felt glad to be able to participate as Swedish speakers. The issues around organisation and engagement are similar to those with which we are familiar in Scotland, and Friends are of course occupied with similar concerns and activities in their daily lives. Inevitably we felt that there was much that we could learn from each other and we are grateful for this opportunity that was created for us by BYM.

John Phillips  
South East Scotland AM

### **Epistle of Sweden Yearly Meeting, May 2023**

Dear Friends, wherever you may be.

What is an epistle? An epistle conveys a spiritual message from us, from a meeting where we came to decisions with God's guidance. The inner light and our quaker practice help us to navigate the tension between tradition and renewal, physical and digital meetings for worship, paid and voluntary work, our spiritual and material inheritance.

These opposites should not exclude each other, but our challenge lies in finding a good balance, for example through hybrid meetings. A spiritual home can be something beyond a physical space.

This year's theme was Svartbäcken – Its history and significance. In an opening presentation we saw pictures and film fragments from the history of Svartbäcken as a hub for Swedish and international Friends' meetings. Many summer camps, retreats and yearly meetings have been held here. Later we worked on the theme from three different perspective groups. The past, where more stories and memories were shared, the future, where we examined the idea of what a physical space can give us, and what meaning it carries. In the present, practical work took place, digging and planting bushes.

We addressed the importance of taking good care of our financial resources but also on a personal level, the wellbeing and working environment of staff as well as volunteers.

Quaker Service Sweden told us about its ongoing projects in Bangladesh, Burundi, Georgia, Palestine, and Russia.

The accompaniment programme EAPPI gave a report about its ongoing work for human rights in Palestine and Israel.

We feel that the chosen theme is deeply symbolic. We have heard similar questions from several members and international visitors alike: Where are we heading? How do we meet changes? New possibilities do not stand in opposition to traditions. We hope and look forward to exchanging experiences with Friends from other countries.

Because no matter which forms or paths we choose in a world in change, we walk in the light together.

Greetings from the Swedish Yearly Meeting held in Svartbäcken 18-21 May 2023

## **Switzerland Yearly Meeting**

26–29 May, Herzberg

On the slopes of the Herzberg in western Switzerland over the weekend of Pentecost, around 30 Friends gathered from across Switzerland, plus visitors from around Europe, Africa and the Asia West Pacific Section. The theme of the gathering was 'Yes We Can' – with twin focuses on the health and nurturing of the community ('We') and on social concerns and action: making a contribution to peace, justice and the sustainability of our environment ('Can'). The second of these strands in particular seemed to generate and sustain a lot of energy over the time spent together, starting from a feeling of wanting to do more in the world, then looking at the considerable amount of work already undertaken by Friends in Switzerland, and finally developing into several new working groups being set up on different topics with individuals volunteering to lead them.

At the same time, and contributing to this process, the importance of relationships within the Yearly Meeting was clear. I could feel a depth of knowing that comes from a long-standing community in which individuals are well known and valued. Newcomers were also made to feel welcome and a session on the Saturday morning facilitated deep sharing and a chance for people to be fully present with their hopes and fears. The relationships between the Yearly Meeting and other Swiss Quaker organisations were also reaffirmed, especially QUNO; space was found in the programme for a presentation on the organisation as it celebrates its 75-year anniversary this year.

In meetings for worship for business, I especially enjoyed updates from the four meetings that make up SYM: Geneva, Bern, the 'three countries meeting' near Basel, and Zurich. Attention was given to the possibility of different timings and locations of the Yearly Meeting to enable different people to attend. The challenges and joys of a multilingual meeting were highlighted, both in practice throughout the gathering, which was held primarily in English and German, with frequent pauses for

translation (or a useful recap for those with both languages!), and in a report and discussion on the new website that is currently in development.

In keeping with the theme of the gathering, rather than inviting an external speaker, further sessions were offered by Friends within the meeting speaking on their own passions and interests. This led to some fascinating insights into unexpected topics, such as bird conservation in Switzerland and internationally. This was accompanied by stunning photos of different migratory birds, while the important issues of biodiversity loss and monitoring were explained. Another Friend spoke of his own recent experience supporting conscientious objectors in Ukraine, and urged everyone to call on their governments to offer protection to COs from Russia and Ukraine, who currently face persecution in their countries.

Around the other activities of the gathering, time was also found for various artistic pursuits, including an original theatrical performance on the history of Geneva, a collaborative collage and plenty of singing and impromptu music. Feedback at the end indicated this was especially appreciated, adding joyfulness to a long weekend of nourishment and purpose.

Annie Brock Womack  
Sheffield & Balby AM

### **Switzerland YM Epistle**

To the friends all over the world:

As we have done for more than 10 years, we gathered at Pentecost at the Herzberg, beautifully situated above Aarau. After two hybrid annual meetings, we have now been able to have a meeting completely on-site and for this we feel very grateful. Thirty six friends, including guests from the UK, Germany, South Africa, FWCC-AWPS, FWCC-EMES and QUNO staff, spent an intensive weekend together under the theme "Yes we can!". We tried a new annual meeting concept, meant to bring us spiritual nourishment, strengthen the sense of community, identify what concerns we care most about, and how we can work together to address them.

We opened the programme section on strengthening community with a quote from a Swiss friend:

*"All the problems we face can only be solved if our spiritual life is nourished. This is the basis on which we can live our daily lives and help others."*

This quote nourished our exploration, in small groups, of what small and big steps we can take to improve our community, our worship groups, and our spiritual lives.

As we continued work on our shared concerns, the meeting room became more and more colourful. multihued Post-It notes, stuck on posters, collected our ideas, concerns, and possible actions covering inclusion, economic injustice, peace and the

environment. We concluded with positive spirits as small groups self-organized to develop concrete actions to drive these issues forward. Our delegates and international guests made us aware of the connection with Friends across Europe and the world. We particularly appreciated the report of our Friends from QUNO, who gave us insight into their current work and shared with us the joy of being able to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Quaker involvement with the UN this year.

We were presented with two impressive examples of how we can live out our convictions. We heard a presentation from a Friend who just returned from the Ukraine, where he had given support to two conscientious objectors at a supreme court proceedings. He made us once again aware of the painful inner tension between loyalty to one's country and one's convictions that killing is wrong. On a somewhat lighter but nonetheless urgent note another Friend introduced us into bird watching. We learnt how it can be used to monitor the populations of endangered species. We were impressed to hear with what simple but effective means migrating birds can be helped on their way through Switzerland. Language is always a challenge for us in many areas, whether in the design of our new website, which has to be written in three languages, or in our meetings, where we are always grateful to the Friends who take it upon themselves to translate almost everything said from English into German or from French into German. While translating takes a lot of time, it allows for a greater depth as we are able to hear messages twice.

The sense of community could be lived out and strengthened through a delightful and fun set of activities this year. We were challenged to choose a creative way to express ourselves in a group project, either using visual art, singing or drama, and trying the one we felt least gifted in. A number of songs and a community artwork were a joy for all, and the highlight was a theatre performance in which we learned in a most amusing way how Geneva came to be a Swiss canton. The beautiful landscape and the constant sunshine invited us to many walks with personal and deep conversations. We will certainly also remember how many friends got together on the last evening to play music outside for a long time.

Finally, we would like to share with you a quote from "*Quaker faith & practice*" which led us into a conversation about how our spirituality shapes our decisions:

*" We need both a deeper spirituality and a more outspoken witness. If our spirituality can reach the depths of authentic prayer, our lives will become an authentic witness for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, a witness which becomes the context for our prayers. Out of the depths of authentic prayer comes a longing for peace and passion for justice. And our response to violence and injustice is to pray more deeply, because only God can show us the way out of the mess that the world is in. And only God gives us the strength to follow that Way."*

(Gordon Matthews, 1989)