

Epistle: Southern Africa Yearly Meeting 2-8 January 2018

With great excitement after such a long break between yearly meetings, about a hundred Friends gathered in the welcoming rooms of the Good Shepherd Retreat Centre, overlooking the blue of the Hartebeespoort Dam and under the blue of the African sky, in the Magaliesberg mountains, South Africa.

Friends from Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe settled in and mingled with new Friends such as visitors Jane Dawson and Margot Lunnon from Britain Yearly Meeting and well as welcoming returning Visiting Friends Colin Bartlett, David Jones and Lee Taylor also from that Meeting. We were extremely blessed to have Gretchen Castle, General Secretary of Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) with us too. We also welcomed Definate Mudzingwa of the American Friends Service Committee Office in Zimbabwe. We keenly felt the absence of any Friends from Botswana and hope that it will not be too long until they can be with us again at a Yearly Meeting.

What was immediately noticeable about this Yearly Meeting was the lively and confident group of Young Friends as well as a livelier and even more confident group of children racing around - picking up on previously-made friendships. The dedication of Amanda Gibberd, in particular, as well as Betsy Coville, Julie Machin, and Enid Ellis to the well-being of the children resulted in a full children's gathering which included making beautiful dream-catchers and cloth hearts and interviewing Friends on what to do about climate change. Exhausted but happy children collapsed into bed at the end of each full day.

The beauty of the surroundings complemented the peaceful and spiritual working-through of our Quaker business rooted in mornings spent in silent worship and worship-sharing. These two hours of prayerful contemplation anchored our interactions and our processes and greatly assisted the "gatheredness" of our Meetings for Worship for Business. The worship sharing groups acted as "home groups" – which allowed for the building of closer ties and deeper friendships.

The agenda for the Yearly Meeting, built on the basis laid in the past few years, meant the days flowed easily by with built-in free time and long meal times allowing for rest, rejuvenation and fellowship as well as many cooling dips in the pool.

We were very aware of the number of testimonies to the lives of departed Friends in our Meeting. We treasured having Kelitha Schmid (widow of John) with us, as we were able to share memories of him with her and her presence made us all feel closer to him. We were also able to share memories of David Jobson who was with us at the last Yearly Meeting. 2017 has been a year of the felling of some giant trees in our Southern Africa Quaker forest.

The first day or so of our meeting were spent in Summer School: learning about Quaker Communication, social media use and Quaker history, including the close Quaker links between Europe, North America and Southern Africa. In this we were greatly assisted by Young Friends who dramatised these links on a large world map with brightly coloured wool. Learning about those involved in the Abolitionist movement, the Underground Railroad, war relief and efforts on behalf of refugees and others needing sanctuary through the ages, has been inspirational. And, in a Continent where the contributions of woman are often undervalued, we were grateful for the opportunity to learn of Quaker Heroines such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Fry.

As part of our ongoing quest to utilise our Quaker resources more responsibly, we reviewed our investment policies and determined that while we have to guard against earning less from our investments in order to be able to continue to fund our coming together, we wanted to be more discerning in our investment strategy. We decided that we would advise the Trustees of ECTF and the other Quaker Trusts to consider investing a portion of our monies off-shore, investing in ethical and sustainable funds or companies.

Nancy Fee and George Nchindia ran an Internet Café which helped Friends stay in touch with friends and family and also helped those unfamiliar with online communications to become more comfortable and practised.

The Special Interest Groups were well-attended and covered a range of issues including broader topics such as: “Kingdom Capture in Swaziland”, “Working with the Disabled” and “Migration in Africa” as well as more Quaker-focused SIGs such as: “the Quaker UN Summer School”, the “World Family of Friends” and “Quaker Pastoral Care – Eldership and Oversight”.

We felt held by our Clerks, John Inglis and Helen Holleman who chaired the Meetings for Business for Worship with gentle but firm guidance. The Yearly Meeting Elders met regularly to attend to SAYM pastoral care and took responsibility for ringing the YM Bell after breaks which contributed to our sessions starting on time.

We continued our new “tradition” of asking seasoned Friends to share their Quaker journeys in a 15-minute talk. This year we heard from Rory Short who was inspired by William Penn at an early age but joined Friends in Liverpool only after finishing his engineering studies. What stood out about Rory’s talk in particular is his faithful commitment to attending Meeting for Worship every Sunday, something he has done for over 50 years. Mark Povall talked us through his life as a born-Quaker, Young Friend and Friend and his experiences in Johannesburg, Cape Town and KZN Monthly Meetings. The way in which Mark’s faith has sustained his involvement in social justice concerns shone through in his talk.

This year’s Richard Gush Lecture was an entertaining, inspiring and hopeful lecture delivered by Nancy Fee, Clerk of Pretoria Monthly Meeting entitled: “Travelling on Inward and Outward Journeys”. The Lecture was a journey through Nancy’s childhood in a Quaker/Catholic home and her early years in Canada through her working life involved in international organisations, particularly UNAIDS, working in developing countries on a number of Continents. Nancy’s lecture, like her life, demonstrate George Fox’s injunction to be “patterns in the world”, to “Let our Lives Speak”. The lecture chimed perfectly with the Ministry coming out of that morning’s Meeting for Worship which had concerned how one moves from anxiety to hope, from anger to love, in challenging injustices in the world.

In tune with that hopefulness and love we took the momentous decision, for the first time in our Yearly Meeting’s history, to invite FWCC to host its 2023 World Plenary Gathering here in South Africa and look forward to the challenges and experiences that this opportunity will open up for our meetings.

The Young Friends Programme worked well, helped enormously by September’s YF Inter-visitation. They courageously tackled a local abseiling course and organised the very successful Celebration of music, stories, dance and song which ended our meeting.

The theme for our Yearly Meeting was Diversity and as part of Summer School, we spent an evening discussing our differences and similarities. Some played a game, acting out how privilege arises from simple things such as: not being hungry, being raised by both parents, education etc. We also relayed our family histories. We remembered that while our immediate ancestors come from the four corners of the globe, our ancient ancestors, those of the entire human race, come from just down the road, in the Cradle of Humankind and that we are, all of humanity, one related family.