

Secretary's Report to Section Gathering April 2011

In the past I have introduced our Section as the largest geographically, of the four in the world, but with the smallest numbers of Quakers. I now add that AWPS is the Section that has experienced some of the worst physical disasters in the world and reflect on what this has meant for our spiritual growth.

If we take a longer look, the 1984 Union Carbide cyanide gas disaster in Bhopal was the worst industrial accident this world has ever seen. Bhopal Friends still suffer the consequences of this event, but it has not stopped them from being the only place to host two Section Gatherings in the short history of AWPS.

In 2008, Burma or Myanmar suffered terrible flooding, with widespread hunger and increased disease, but since that time, the Friends Evangelical Friends church has been established. We are sorry to hear that a recent earthquake in this country has taken even more lives.

The 2009 typhoon Ondoy in the Philippines where parts of Pasig were flooded –the world family of Friends responded generously and environmental work is now in place to help prevent future flooding at local government level, but also by evangelical Friends. I am certain that the majority of Filipino Friends had never at that time ever heard of FWCC, but facing and overcoming disaster brought them into the knowledge of the bodies of Friends worldwide.

2010 saw Mt Merapi volcano erupt near Jogjakarta. This is not a sad story as far as Quakers are concerned, but their Yearly Meeting took place nearby and had just finished when this took place.

2011 has been a tough year, with first the flooding in Queensland and Victoria, Australia. I saw this at first hand, and will make some general comments about this from the perspective of being involved later.

Then an unimaginable crisis again hit Christchurch in Aotearoa NZ, with the earthquake which killed so many and destroyed the beautiful buildings in the city.

The worst catastrophe of all was visited upon Japan, since the end of World War II, and Japanese Friends reported on how they are coping with this. They are providing material assistance to those made homeless in two of their meeting houses, Mito and Tokyo. We have prayed for friends in South Korea, when threats were made against them by North Korea. Nepal is often in the news with bad news stories as well, with struggles for political power between struggles for political power between several groups. We need to also remember [Thailand](#) where [civil unrest](#), [military crackdowns](#) occur regularly and there is [armed confrontation with Cambodia](#). Japan and [China](#) have [confrontations over disputed territorial claims](#) and in [China](#) there have been [massive earthquakes and floods](#).

Collectively, what has this meant for us as a Section to have come up against such hard blows? Initially there is a sense of helplessness and sometimes fear, but I have witnessed how community spirit begins to blossom very soon after a disaster. What is this resurgence of hope and optimism that visits damaged communities? Are we being tested in some way by these disasters? Is our faith in God equal to the tasks and actions we are being called on to do? I actually think that this renewal is the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

As we mature as a Section, we are threshing out what is unique to Quakers in the Asian region, and what binds us? Can we share our common humanity which is built on sorrow and renewed optimism? We must not let ourselves be paralysed by grief-but together, we can learn to live with it.

The 2009 AWPS Essay was one attempt to find something uniquely Asian about our part of the Friends World Committee for consultation. Copies of “Courageous Spirit” are available from Australia- AYM Book Supplies. I believe such writing can understanding take our faith into new knowledge.

We need to know one another better, to love one another- a hard task for AWPS Friends, as most of our work is done through emails. Given that we have a variety of languages, it is easy to come to grief in misunderstanding, when we see one another so seldom. We need to pray more in these times- especially the prayer that Jesus taught us “thy Kingdom come, thy will be done- on earth (especially this part of it)”- so that we focus on where God is guiding us and make our work more fruitful?

The work on our **Strategic Plan** commenced 2 years ago, which identified 5 areas of work for AWPS. They are tailored around the fact that we meet only every three years and are:

- Strengthening communication within the Section;
- Strengthening spiritual growth through study, prayer, retreats;
- Encouraging and strengthening dialogue between programmed and un-programmed Friends;
- Encouraging and strengthening leadership amongst Friends and in particular amongst Young Friends and finally
- Developing our witness in relation to Global Change.

At Manila we saw that the Gatherings strengthen our faith in the love of God, heal wounds and promote unity, peace, justice and simplicity. Connections between different traditions of worship are being strengthened by the use of alternating silent worship and programmed worship, the practice of waiting in the Spirit, home groups and also much singing. The warm welcome and kind attention by Philippine Friends has brought a deep and strong tie among us.

Friends are experiencing the sense of family, learning from each other in friendship and openness. Friends also felt a new sense of opportunity to contribute.

The presence and presentations of our overseas speakers was helpful as were those providing a local perspective. Further translation of Quaker materials into languages of the section is also planned to help the sharing of stories and faith.

Our **Intervisitation** has become stronger, restricted only by finances. Our Handbook gives guidelines on how to make these visits an occasion for spiritual sharing and growth. Australia Yearly Meeting and soon Aotearoa/New Zealand Yearly Meeting invite members of AWPS meetings to their annual gatherings. This happens in Japan as well. We look for strengthening of these kinds of opportunities.

Quaker Learning is a related area and there are bright lights shining in India, with Friends from different groups sharing their insights at the All India Gathering. They hold regular work and study camps for Young Friends, and are embarking on translations of classic

Quaker writings, so they can understand and discuss them in their own language. We pray this will be possible across our Section. Our other bright star is the opening of a **Quaker Learning Centre** in Australia, Silver Wattle, not far from Canberra. This is truly faith of giant proportions, where neither the money for purchase of the property was in place, or full unity of Australian Friends, yet this went ahead and is in its third year. Its Director Helen Bayes reported on her visions for Quaker learning for all of Asia, as well as local Friends. Of course, Aotearoa New Zealand has had learning programs at Whanganui for several decades – which has strengthened their resolve in a number of important for environmental and ethical areas. The renewed worshipping group in Singapore has put Quaker learning right in the fore of their activities and their witness to their wider community is already significant in relation to interfaith. Please pray for them as they uncover the richness of Quaker faith and life.

The AWPS **website**, is currently being revised to bring it into line with the other Sections and the World Office. We see how in particular Europe and the Middle East Section puts considerable resources of time and money into the development of Quaker courses in around 13 languages and providing opportunities for on-line study. I think this is the way for us to go- for us to have such a surety in our faith- what makes us unique, how we are constantly guided by the Living Christ, the teacher within?

Global Change: The six queries of the Global Change Committee have been discussed at our Gathering and Friends have made valuable responses, which will be taken to the Committee and forwarded to the World Office. The concerns were also discussed at the Young Friends Gathering. Friends were asked to take back the 6 queries to their Meetings and to send in further responses to the Committee.

Our Global Change committee meets regularly by Skype to plan ahead for AWPS involvement in the proposed Consultation and then in the World Conference, and to make an impact on our governments at home to adopt more eco friendly policies. They are currently discussing Japan and nuclear energy.

Young Friends: The Young Friends reported that YFs are widely dispersed and use different names for their groups. The AWPSYF Gathering was also held at Manila with 25 participants. Three YFs of the AWPS, Emily Chapman-Searle AYM, Piyush Augustine Mahoba YM and John Ocol PEFIM, are now on the FWCC YAF Committee working to continue the mission of the 2005 World Gathering of YFs.

In terms of future leadership we have seen glimmerings of hope.

The 2005 World Gatherings of Young Friends did uncover some future leadership- in our case Pradip Lamichhane from Nepal, a Japanese Young Friend and a handful from Australia and New Zealand. The writings in *Spirit Rising: Young Quaker Voices*, have a smattering of AWPS entries, but I pray that if this opportunity arises in future, that we will see double or triple the numbers of entries from AWPS. The Philippines has Young Friends in significant numbers, so I believe that investment in and encouraging their spiritual development will bring great benefits in the future.

Our current leadership: We have been so fortunate to have had Dilawar Chetsingh as AWPS Clerk for the past six years and we will miss his guiding hand across all of our activities. We welcome as Clerk Patricia Macgregor from Aotearoa NZ, and Ronald Titus as Associate Secretary. Taisoo Kim Watson will take up the role of Treasurer from 1/11/12. As the jobs become more complex, we are failing to attract Asian Friends into positions of leadership, whereas in the past Clerks and Secretaries came from Asia proper.

FWCC Affiliations: Since our last Gathering, we have expanded by three groups, Marble Rocks, Mahoba and PEFIM (Philippines) and this has doubled our membership. We received two applications for affiliation one from Daejon Group, which is 2 hours by train from Seoul. The Friends in Seoul have heartily endorsed this application. The Christian Friends Trust in Karnataka India who have been working in this area for 20 years and has 6 churches with 220 members has also applied. Visitors from outside India have been appointed and a report will be made to the CEC in 2012.

The World Conference: We are still determining how AWPS will bring itself, its essence to Kabarak University in Kenya. We will have extensive representation from affiliated and non affiliated Meetings and groups in our Section. Our Treasurer advises regarding funding attendance at the World Conference that AWPS general funds are not available for this purpose. What we can do is to study the material soon to be placed on the website, www.saltandlight2012.org in home meetings and churches. This will provide broad understanding on the ways Friends are thinking and addressing issues in this generation. We are looking to grow our leadership and participation by Friends in this event will surely bear fruit.

Our early Quaker exemplar George Fox says “bring all into the worship of God”. At our recent Gathering, we worshipped in every way and kind of practice that Friends in our region use. We studied the Bible and other writings, but most importantly, we shared our experiences of how God is speaking in our hearts as we daily take up our cross to follow our living Lord. Christ plants the seed in our hearts, which is the Kingdom of Heaven, and as it receives nourishment, it will surely reap benefits for our collective work and witness. May we go forward in peace and in love.

Valerie Joy
Executive Secretary AWPS