

## EPISTLE

To all Friends everywhere, warm greetings from Friends in Australia. We pay our respects to the Elders of the Indigenous people of the Bibbulmun country —past, present and future— upon whose land we are gathered for our Yearly Meeting, 7–14 January 2012, at Christ Church Grammar School, Claremont in Perth, Western Australia. The significance of this place, on the cliffs overlooking Derbal Yarragan (the Swan River Estuary), was brought home to us in the ‘welcome to country’ by Noongar elder, Noel Nannup, who traced the traditional trails of Indigenous learning, healing and cultural activity that coalesced around our place of meeting. Sandra Hill, a Yorga (woman) told the sorry story, documented in the bureaucratized letters and memos, of the continuing injustice visited upon her family, over successive generations. By contrast, our Donald Groom Fellow, Maggie White, has shown us ways in which Indigenous communities may be empowered through a ‘whole of life’ approach.

As we have gazed out to the blue waters and sky of the Estuary, we have pondered and explored the requirement of ‘what does love require of us’ as individuals and as a community of Friends. As noted in the State of the Society address, the reports that appear in our *Documents in Advance* show us to be an ambitious group. But given our small numbers and the wide range of issues we have embraced, we face the challenges of managing the competition for time. How do we create the space for engagement in social witness and for the nurture of the soul so that, in the words of Meister Eckhart, time is not ‘what keeps the light from reaching us’. This subject is one that has recurred repeatedly, like the theme in a fugue, over the course of our Yearly Meeting.

There was space for nurture of the artistic soul during the Fine Arts Day, held prior to Yearly Meeting, through the creative experience in a number of different forms. The theme of ‘what does love require of us’ was further explored, spiritually and practically, in the various Summer Schools. Both of these activities contributed to preparing our hearts and minds for the work ahead.

A concern that we have pursued is to weave stronger threads across the various levels of our Quaker structures in order to communicate effectively and ensure that our energies are efficiently applied. We have embraced the power of technology to provide an on-line edition of *The Australian Friend*, and we are also reaching out to the wider world with the newly launched Quaker Voice website and the first live-streamed Backhouse Lecture.

The Burundi Peace Choir demonstrated the healing power of singing as they welcomed us all to the Backhouse Lecture. In this lecture, David Atwood, the former Director of the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva, reminded us that the task of peace building is long haul-work; cathedral-building in time and scope. However, in the Lecture we were shown the results that a small Quaker presence in Geneva and New York have accomplished in areas such as small armaments, the banning of anti-personnel mines, and defining peacemaking at the United Nations and beyond. This gives us reason to be hopeful of what can be achieved if we strive together in what an earlier Quaker, Duncan Wood, described as ‘building the institutions of peace’.

Our deliberations have also been enriched by the presence of our AYM Visitor, Arbiter Simorangkir from Indonesia who has told us of the challenges of Friends’ witness in Indonesia. Some of us are preparing for the World Conference of Friends in Kenya by exploring the theme of ‘salt and light’.

As in the Friends in Stitches project, where panels are emerging with greater depth and clarity from one Yearly Meeting to the next, we are seeing the weaving together of threads of earlier initiatives. The Silver Wattle Quaker Centre, on the shores of Weereewa (Lake George) in New South Wales, continues to develop and is offering a wide range of activities for 2012, including The Ministry of Healing, Connecting with Australia's First Peoples, and youth peace education. We have also appointed a Peace and Earthcare Worker, Robert Howell from Aotearoa/New Zealand Yearly Meeting, to deepen our work in peace and social justice and our care for the Earth. Robert will explore the various drivers that underlie threats to global wellbeing, violent conflict and environmental degradation. We see clearly the need for us to define a flourishing life, one of joy and meaning that lives within the finite boundaries of the Earth.

Our Yearly Meeting was enhanced by the presence and informal ministry of the children, Junior Young Friends and Young Friends as they brought joy to our lives. We were also able to reflect upon the inspirational example of those who have recently passed away.

We have been blessed with many initiatives to seek new Light; nurtured and strengthened to wrestle with new truths. We have faith that new energy will emerge, enabling us, in the words of our Backhouse Lecturer, 'to practise the Gospel of Hope, leave despair and complacency behind us and get down to work'.