Yearly Meeting 2015
State of the Society Address

This annual address to Australia Yearly Meeting grew out of the old Quaker practice of Yearly Meeting Queries which were directed at Meetings at all levels, and were to be answered in writing at each yearly gathering. Many of us will recognise the familiar query: ‘How is the Truth prospering among you?’ It contains an expectation that we will regularly reflect and record how the Light is working in our consciences and how the Spirit is moving in our hearts and minds. In 1926, London Yearly Meeting expressed the question formally this way: ‘What is the religious state of your meeting; and is there among you evidence of growth in the truth?’

We have no such question in our Handbook. The Advices and Queries that we rely on and find so full of wisdom are exhortations that we contemplate individually. We have no queries specifically for Regional and Local Meetings, AYM Officers or AYM Committees. Indeed, in the Handbook, which describes the use of Documents in Advance, there is no guidance as to what the reports are to cover.

So each report gives what noteworthy things have been done and what issues have come up during the year, including matters for YM decision. We do not hear how these have been a religious challenge, or how they are evidence of growth in the truth.

So in trying to describe the ‘State of the Society’ in this address, I am also reflecting on what Regional Meetings, AYM Officers and Committees have and have not reported in Documents in Advance. There is much to read between the lines as well as along them.

I am drawn, in this service, to try and answer the 1926 London Yearly Meeting question, as applied to Australian Quaker faith and community today. I hope it will be useful to you, to hear and reflect on the challenge of the old query, difficult though it is to find the words that truthfully express our contemporary responses and our seeking in these differently challenging times.

So this is the question in my heart, and I offer it again to you: ‘What is the religious state of your meeting; and is there among you evidence of growth in the truth?’

Friends, I ask you to put aside, for the moment, any worries you have about the words religious and truth. Let’s just go with them!

What surprised me most in reading the Regional Meeting reports is that no mention is made anywhere of the work of Clerks, Ministry and Oversight, Finance, Property or Hospitality Committees. Yet we know that many Friends, in such committees, are continuously and quietly caring for the spiritual life and welfare of their meetings, their members, attenders and enquirers. What is there to say about those foundations of our religious society today? Is it assumed that these tasks simply get done without fanfare, like housework, or running a household? Is it only the unusual or innovative news that should be reported to Yearly Meeting?

This seems to me a sorely depleted process compared with what was expected in earlier times. Our official roles and our core committees are the foundations of our community life and witness. They are religiously challenging responsibilities—the primary expression of our testimonies. They are shaped by the resources and
technologies that come our way. And how they are done forms the bedrock of our faithfulness in community. But we are not told how—or whether—these Friends are upheld, prayed for, encouraged and comforted by their Meeting.

There is one clue, however, in appreciative references made by the Presiding Clerk and our AYM Secretary to their support groups—a service not acknowledged in any other report! Friends, my impression is that support groups are a well-established practice among Australian Friends today; clearness meetings, too. They are offered to many Friends carrying a heavy load; for example, AYM officers, the Backhouse Lecturer, the Director of Silver Wattle Quaker Centre and Friends acting under Concern. Do they lessen the problem of burnout from unrewarding tasks, referred to by one Regional Meeting? While the process of support groups and clearness meetings is private, the practice is not, and its contribution to the state of our society and the growing of truth, has not been recorded.

That said, I want to share some broader impressions prompted by the RM reports:

- Isolation of small meetings is a worry.
- Distance between meetings is regretted.
- Low participation in business meetings is a sorrow.
- Difficulties in filling RM appointments and committees is a burden.
- Simplifying RM structures, or reducing what is expected of small meetings, might be the way to go.

In the past, worries about our numbers have prompted much conversation and effort towards ‘outreach’, with the aim of attracting people who would find the Quaker way interesting and relevant to their lives. But this year’s RM reports barely mention outreach. The one mention is Canberra Regional Meeting’s Meeting for Worship at the National Folk Festival each year, a massive and very sympathetic environment for us.

We are actually very open to newcomers. We rejoice in hearing them say they have ‘come home’. We are still delighted to recognise some of us as ‘Compass Quakers’, because of the ABC TV Compass program in 2003, which interviewed various Australian Friends in such an effective way that some viewers came to a Meeting and stayed with us. But we seem to have lost confidence in local outreach through local public events and publicity.

In striking contrast, however, the AYM Clerk and Secretary and the new Quaker Learning Committee see outreach being done through the AYM website, AYM publications and official statements of the Society. There is much on the web now, and some newcomers have already done their research, before arriving at a Meeting for Worship. So is the question, now, about how to care for them?

The fact is that Australia Yearly Meeting is not growing, and there seems to be nothing much we can do about it. Our national numbers, as shown in the tabular statements, have not shown steady growth since I don’t know when. AYM membership hovers just below 1000. We have a slightly lower number of Attenders, around 850, and about 250 children. We can be sure of this, even though the figures in our latest tabular statement don’t add up, due to definition difficulties.

I try to resist questions like ‘Why are we not keeping up with population growth, or at least growing by a healthy percentage?’ Perhaps the question now is: does it a matter
to us? The Australian Quaker Survey, conducted last year, will perhaps produce some interesting findings about our demography, our comings and goings, and our religious or theological patterns.

Perhaps the most important question is this: What are Friends actually doing for each other? How is the Life, the Quaker way, prospering among us? It turns out that we are actually doing a lot!

All Regional Meetings hold annual residential weekends, and last year’s themes included building community, strengthening friendships, getting to know one another in ways that deepen spiritual experience, and sharing how we live the testimony of Integrity.

Residential weekends are also important for their inclusion of children and Junior Young Friends. Two Regional Meetings mentioned their weekly or fortnightly programs for children and JYFs. And one reported its use of all-age worship; and popular JYF sleepovers at the Meeting House.

Meetings are offering Meetings for Healing, mid-week Meeting for Worship, Quiet Days at the Meeting House, and mutual support groups for spiritual nurture and grandparenting. At the sale of its home for 60 years, Friends House, Victoria Regional Meeting held a weekend of celebrations of its life and history, thus helping to heal the sense of loss.

RM Newsletters got no mention. But we know they are produced faithfully in varying forms. One Regional Meeting has an active website as well. These services are a labour of love for inclusion and sharing of news and views. The AYM Secretary’s Newsletter attracted an appreciative comment. Nothing was said about The Australian Friend.

One thing that puzzles me is the way the Young Friends’ report is filed with ‘committees’. I wonder why. Is it not more akin to a Meeting in the way it serves its members and attenders? YFs report that their activities are ‘an important source of friendship and spiritual strength for our lives’. They held their pre-YM camp as usual, gathered as part of the Easter Family Gathering at Silver Wattle, and sent a representative to Aotearoa/New Zealand YM.

Looking at the reports as a whole, I am struck by the emphasis on giving local opportunities for Quaker learning by Meetings. Altogether, Friends have offered learning sessions on Advices and Queries, Quaker Basics, Quaker Fundamentals, Quaker Testimonies, Quaker Heritage, Quaker Bible Study, Hearts & Minds Prepared, Quaker Processes, Earthcare and Permaculture. These seem often to be held after Sunday Meeting for Worship or on Friday evenings.

Opportunities for learning and spiritual nourishment at Silver Wattle were mentioned appreciatively by our Presiding Clerk and three Regional Meetings. Tasmanian Friends are bringing much enthusiasm for study and learning opportunities to the QLA Committee and Brisbane Friends are enjoying being the host meeting for Meeting for Learning.

Another striking thing about this year’s reports, with both Meetings and committees, is how we are being changed by information technology. Its promise of easy
communication by email, skype and websites gives hope about lessening the tyranny of distance, the isolation and smallness of many Meetings. Its use for outreach and access to learning is exciting us. The latest revisions of the Handbook can be readily checked. The Australian Friend and Dictionary of Australian Quaker Biography can be read online or downloaded.

Our AYM Secretary sees herself as hearthkeeper, being a clearinghouse, a compiler of business documents, keeper of records and standard practices, and a conductor of AYM business. Through internet communication, these jobs can be done and kept up-to-date faster, and in a more inclusive manner than ever before.

The website is an increasingly crucial and complex tool and we employ a technical expert to maintain and improve it. Some AYM committees may be able to meet and work through the internet, thus creating new possibilities in how they are shaped and what they are expected to do. These expanding horizons have prompted the establishment of an AYM Information Technology Expert Committee to steer us into effective use of our website, dropbox, facebook, blogs and meetings by internet—all possibilities unimagined by many of us, a few years ago.

Another major change is the timing and location pattern of YM gatherings. This will affect our annual rhythms at regional and local levels in many ways not yet clear.

At the same time we are doing much work for child protection and respectful relationships in the Society, for peace and nonviolence, justice for First Nations Peoples, earthcare, climate change, human rights of asylum seekers, friendship across faith and cultural differences, abolition of nuclear weapons, overseas aid and international development. All this work is seen as rewarding and worthwhile.

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Victoria Regional Meeting
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