

**RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)
IRELAND YEARLY MEETING**

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Dear Friends,

We have had an eventful year since our last epistle with our on-going discernment on same sex marriage, including a Special Yearly Meeting held in March 2018, and now our Ireland Yearly Meeting held in Limerick this July. We have all been, and continue to be on, a journey of deep worship, fuelled by a desire to find an outcome acceptable to all.

We cherish the wide range of views and theological approaches held within our Society and we believe that this diversity enriches all of us. We acknowledge that it has been at times bewildering and painful as we try to reconcile our very different views about same sex marriage with the friends that we love and care for. Our primary concern following our discernment to allow same sex marriage where Preparative or Monthly Meetings feel able to witness this, is to ensure that all the members of our society are able to continue their individual faith journeys in a way that they feel brings them closer to God.

We have tested our procedures around discernment and have taken comfort from the soundness of Quaker methods that help us deal with difficult issues that divide us. Our experience reminds us of what others in far more difficult positions of violent conflict have and continue to struggle through, to arrive at peaceful resolutions and increases our admiration and empathy for those on that path.

During our Yearly Meeting held around the theme “Discerning and Living our Testimonies Together” we were blessed to have so many speakers provide us with thought-provoking and nourishing ideas.

Ben Pink Dandelion, our public speaker for this year on the theme of “Living our Faith Daily: the practice of testimony” talked about our “transformed and transforming lives” where our everyday decisions become regular small acts of discernment “winnowed by the Holy Spirit”. It is when we step back from the “Spirit-led line in the middle of meeting where we gather and hold each other in love” that we fall into pride, mistrust and fear.

The meeting identified that it is our Quaker fear; of doing, or being perceived of doing, the wrong thing; fear of our contribution being too small or insignificant in the greater scheme of things; fear of engaging with our community and therefore maintaining our position of being “apart” that needs to be overcome.

We have been challenged to find ways in which Quakers can make their voices louder. Although we are small in numbers, we have been reminded of the courage of past Friends to seek to make a difference in the world - not all endeavours were successful or wise, such as one journey made by Friends in 1658 seeking to convert the Pope! - but they sought to change society rather than just wait and adapt to what was changing around them.

A more recent example of how a small number can make a big impact is our Yearly Meeting here in Limerick. Up to 200 participants have been provided with food, accommodation, love and a very warm welcome by a small Meeting who are re-invigorating a long history of Quaker engagement in the city.

We have incredible people who work with us on Quaker projects, many of whom are not Quakers, but who embody and live our values and testimonies so well that someone in receipt of their services talks about "Love, that's what you get from Quakers, love".

It is, in fact, Love that has been the dominant message emerging throughout the year. We have a loving God, love our neighbour, love our environment, love ourselves with all our faults and allow ourselves to be courageous and in that way we love and serve God.

"Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand." *Isaac Penington 1616-1679*

"...that we are to be priests one to another, continually coming forward to each other, washing each other's feet: if that is the heart of our practice of testimony, our living of daily faith, our inhabitation of being Quaker, shall come all the more easily". *Ben Pink Dandelion*

"Finding ways to overcome evil with good is the business of our lives" *Charles B Lamb* (paraphrased from Romans C12 v 21).

Signed by the Clerking Team of:

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Clodagh Davis (Assistant Clerk)
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