

3/12/ 2009

Dear Friends,

In the spirit of the greatest possible transparency, this epistle from the AYM AQC Working Group to all Australian Friends hopes to inform you of the progress made in 2009 as well as our plans for the AQC in 2010-2011.

While there is a report in Documents in Advance and reports to Regional Meetings were made in November, we feel there is much more to be said to prepare Friends to consider the future of the AQC when we meet for the Yearly Meeting in January 2010.

The AQC Working Group is continuing the formation of an Australian Quaker Centre as an exercise of the Spirit through 2010, and is preparing a plan for 2010-2012 with a view to establishing a more permanent AQC. There is an urgent need to strengthen the spiritual grounding and faith of Australian Quakers, not only to grow us spiritually and to know who we are in much deeper terms than we are presently able to articulate to others, but also to prepare us for the public witness that will be needed in the years ahead.

There are two separate and equally vital ways this work of spiritual nurture needs to be carried forward.

1. Where people live

The first is to offer Quaker spiritual nurture and courses in places where people live, scattered across Australia. Many cannot travel because of family or work commitments and need the nurture to come to them.

Quaker Learning Australia (QLA) oversees the Meeting for Learning program of retreats and personal study which can be hosted by Regional Meetings in rotation, and has also established a website for distance learning of prepared courses. QLA is for brokering and making courses available, and will also encourage the development of new courses.

One aim of the AQC residential programs is to bring through Australian Quaker teachers and facilitators who can then travel in the ministry within Australia. The AQC might then be able to hold a series of AQC-on-the-road courses, moving around Australia. Such a development would require support from the host Regional Meeting to arrange the venue and guarantee sufficient numbers to cover the costs.

While some feel this is a way toward a more permanent AQC, our view is that we need to establish the courses and teachers, and then it will become clear which are most suitable for taking 'on tour'. This was the case for the Meeting for Learning retreats that were founded in Melbourne and then began to move nationally.

2. Quaker centre removed from the place of living

The second method for the spiritual nurture of Australian Friends is to provide a place where people can be totally removed from the implications and constraints of their daily living at home. The experiences of people who have spent time at Pendle Hill or

Woodbrooke is that such a stay can be transforming, and engenders major changes in spiritual and daily lives. The AQC will provide this opportunity for Friends in an Australian context without having to go overseas. Another aim of the AQC is to bring through Australian Quaker teachers and facilitators who can then travel in the ministry within Australia.

The *Silver Wattle* Property

We do not want to be searching for and negotiating a new venue every year.

We are drafting a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Catholic Church, owners of *Silver Wattle*, for Quakers to occupy the property on a caretaker, rent-free basis for the period 10/1/2010-31/1/2011. This MOU will go to Standing Committee and to YM2010 in Adelaide. This MOU will provide needed transitional time while a legal entity (separate to AYM) is established to purchase *Silver Wattle* and operate it as the Australian Quaker Centre.

Silver Wattle is a former sheep grazing property, on which a small conference centre was established in 1997, and which was then bought by the Catholic Church to continue a House of Prayer community that had moved from Goulburn. That community has now dispersed.

The property is for sale, and long-term rental is not an appealing option for the Church. The property will be sold on a walk in – walk out basis with all facilities, equipment, vehicle, furniture, furnishings and bedding. The Church would welcome an AQC at *Silver Wattle* since it will have spiritual education and formation as a core function, so carrying forward the ministry already begun on this land.

Toward the goal of purchasing Silver Wattle, we are:

- establishing closer relationships with the Ngunnawal Elders, as Indigenous custodians of that country
- obtaining an independent valuation of the property
- holding discussions with the local Palarang Shire to assess what constraints might be imposed on use of the property
- conducting a detailed survey of the property in terms of what needs to be done to make the facilities most useful and safe
- planning to have an environmental audit
- considering options for financing the purchase

For those who have not been to *Silver Wattle*, we are preparing a short DVD film to illustrate the property.

Alternative Properties

In the venue search of the 2009 AQC a wide-ranging investigation was undertaken of which we spoke about in Documents in Advance. Since then the property Rydal Mount has come onto the market.

We have visited and reviewed Rydal Mount and arrived at the following conclusion. Rydal Mount is a well-developed and cost-effective retreat centre, with public

transport access, and up to date fittings. It has a lower capacity (accommodation, conference rooms and kitchen) than Silver Wattle. Bedrooms are less private. The site is small and fully developed, so it offers fewer options for future developments such as a religious community and food production. It does not have the same advantages as closeness to a major centre with airport, and a large Quaker Meeting. Rydal Mount is therefore not preferred to Silver Wattle.

AQC Legal Entity and Governance

We recommend the establishment of a separate entity, external to AYM, as a Quaker-aligned organisation, with its own board of trustees or governing council. Models for this include The Friends School, Quaker Service Australia, Friends Fellowship of Healing, overseas Quaker schools and places like Pendle Hill and Woodbrooke. All of these are independent bodies, separate from the Yearly Meetings of their respective countries.

Such an arrangement:

1. Allows the Centre management to operate more flexibly than the annual decision making cycle of Yearly Meeting
2. Reduces the workload of Yearly Meeting
3. Separates any risk of liability or financial loss from AYM's ledger
4. Allows an independent and appropriate status within the tax and legal systems.

We are obtaining *pro bono* tax and legal advice about possible models for a separate entity.

AQC Program 2010

The AQC will offer the 2010 program in two course blocks: Autumn (Months 4-6) and Spring (months 9-11). Courses offered will be similar to 2009 plus some new ones. Special events planned are: the Weereewa Festival in late March 2010; possibly 1 or 2 Quaker Tapestry weeks; a family weekend at Easter to coincide with the National Folk Festival in April; and NAIDOC week in August and also unprogrammed residential times.

There will be opportunities for staying at the AQC for specified work-camp times to assist with work like wood cutting for winter, care of the orchard, development of vegetable gardens, weed control in creek and paddocks, oiling the wooden verandahs and leak-proofing the shearing shed.

Business Plan

The 2009 AQC has made a small surplus, and there is a healthy reserve left of the \$15526 of donated funds. This outcome was achieved by careful management of costs, and by many teachers and staff choosing to forego their entitlement of pay and travel reimbursements, to a total value of \$19000. During 2009 we trialled a variety of arrangements and events so we now have actual data for estimating costs of accommodation, catering and resident staff, at the AQC.

The budget for a complete year is being drawn up based on plans for 2010. We know we have to draw income from other than Quaker sources and are prepared to host retreats and meetings which assist organizations in tune with Quaker values, where such events do not displace our core ministry. We are considering events such as (for example) retreats for Catholic groups, accommodating parts of the bi-annual Weereewa Festival of Science, Environment and Arts, and meetings/conferences of NGOs engaged in peace and justice activism.

AQC food and meals policy is to provide fresh simple meals using locally and sustainably grown, organic food. For example we bought Australian organic olive oil rather than cheap Spanish oil, and did not providing a full range of out-of season fruit and vegetables. This is part of our witness for earthcare and entails bearing costs over cheaper imported, packaged foods. For us it is an important part of Quaker witness to reduce carbon use and be sustainable, so we have to enter the exercise of learning to adjust our expectations.

There will be other similar cost exercises involved in making the AQC sustainable in terms of energy, water and other resource uses. It is a learning exercise for us, and an example for others.

It has also been suggested to us that we could establish a small business whereby people could come to the AQC to produce goods for sale. Possibilities include preserves from the produce grown on the land, simple furniture (eg Shaker style), or simple flannel or other clothing and simple toys (e.g. Steiner education wooden and cloths items). As a separate activity, set up at minimal cost and using AQC space, it would be a productive activity to balance community work and prayer.

There are *many* possibilities, and one of the jobs for the Working Group in early 2010 will be to sift through the options and decide where to put our efforts.

Marketing and Advertising

It is clear that the Australian Quaker community is not sufficiently large to be the only income source for the AQC.

The potential markets include:

- Quaker working families who have limited holiday time annually
- Quaker retirees who have very limited time or income
- Quaker retirees who have available time and income
- FWCC Australia West Pacific Section Quakers looking for education and formation in Quaker faith
- International travelling Quakers who might link the AQC into their plans
- Members of other faith communities interested in our courses, either laity or religious
- Other faiths groups wishing to facilitate their own retreats or events
- Secular groups working for peace and justice
- Local community and environmental groups
- Individuals seeking a time of retirement from the world

While we have started making Quaker networks aware of the existence of the AQC we have not yet implemented a coherent and targeted strategy to market the AQC and

its courses to each of the potential markets. A wider advertising and marketing program will be developed in early 2010 although it is not likely to be fully effective before 2011-2012.

Vision

We know there is much to be done to work through all these issues and some of that work will need to be done in the first half of 2010.

We will need to establish an AQC entity, engage the staff and volunteers to form the core community at the AQC, continue essential maintenance, carry through the 2010 program, develop wider marketing, carry out due diligence on the property, and make an appeal for funds to purchase the property. A minimum of \$2 million is needed to cover the purchase and to provide a reserve for work to be done.

We have opened a discussion with YM Nominations Committee to form a modified AQC Working Group which will have the necessary spiritual gifts, practical skills, time and energy to carry the AQC forward during 2010-2012.

Many people have expressed the feeling that we should not rush into a property purchase, bearing in mind the financial uncertainties as well as the needs for small meetings to be nurtured locally. Many others have expressed strong feelings we need to proceed with the AQC vision at *Silver Wattle*, taking all care along the way. We welcome comments from anyone who can help us by entering into the discernment process about the AQC.

All of us involved are very aware of the risks and uncertainties – we have been living daily with them for the past 12 months or more!

This epistle is intended to prepare Friends for the important discussions that will shape the future AQC. At YM2010 we will also have available

- A summary of the 2009 AQC courses and finances
- The AQC Plan for 2010-2012
- A report on *Silver Wattle* property, including valuation and planning comments
- A DVD film on *Silver Wattle*
- A proposed MOU with the Catholic Church for 2010

Finally, we hope all Australian Friends will continue to uphold the AQC in their prayers and participate in the midwifery of this emerging spiritual nurture ministry to the extent they feel led.

David Johnson (Convener), Helen Bayes (AQC Director) John Baker, Evelyn Imogen, Sheila Keane, Elizabeth Kwan, Mark Macleod, Kerry O'Regan, Drew Thomas.

AYM AQC Working Group