

**Epistle from the Belgium and Luxemburg Yearly Meeting 2022 annual gathering
held at Chant d'Oiseau, Brussels, Belgium**

09-11 June 2023

***Searching for unity in turbulent times –
from our testimonies to corporate Faith in Action***

To Friends Everywhere,

We met over the sunny weekend of 9-11 June 2023 at Chant-d'Oiseau in Brussels. Our theme was "Searching for Unity in Turbulent Times - from our Testimonies to Corporate Faith in Action". Thirty Friends were present, three of whom were from The Netherlands and Britain Yearly Meeting, EMES, plus our speaker Sister Marianne Goffoël.

Guest Speaker

We heard an inspiring speech. Sister Marianne Goffoël told us about her life and work as a Dominican nun. Her story took us from her formative years in 1950s Brussels, to Algeria and then Iraq, where she lived for many years and learned that true dialogue begins with sharing lived experience and concerns.

Sister Marianne also shared reflections about the Catholic Church and Islam, and the "occasional tensions between heaven and earth" she witnessed in her life. Believers must be connected to both heaven and earth, she told us. So faith in the hereafter should not lead to indifference or demobilisation in the face of the world's problems, but on the contrary to commitment to the service of human beings, especially the most disadvantaged.

She took the name Marianne Ibrahim to signify that she would follow Abraham in leaving their homeland to follow God's instruction to go among other nations.

For the last 27 years, Sister Marianne has also been much involved in the Centre El Kalima in Brussels, a centre for Christian-Muslim relations.

Conflict

We have once again considered the tensions and conflicts in our meeting. We shifted our agenda to respond to the issues and held a worship sharing session. Both longstanding Friends and newcomers spoke about conflict and community building.

The earlier attempts to find solutions have not borne fruit and have left us with pain and damaged relationships. Perhaps we must accept that being in community always implies a degree of tension and conflict. We have been reminded that it is best not to focus on the problem as we move forward, but rather to aim for the space of opportunity on either side. When skiing in the forest in wintertime, it's better to focus on the spaces between the trees rather than the trees themselves. We have been given another image of what might be our goal: a tree that, as it has grown over the years, has partially enveloped the iron fencing on both its sides so that finally they form one body.

Back to our agenda

We explored our Quaker testimonies or “SPICES” in small groups. We shared our individual experiences with each other and started to seek what might lead us into collective understanding and action.

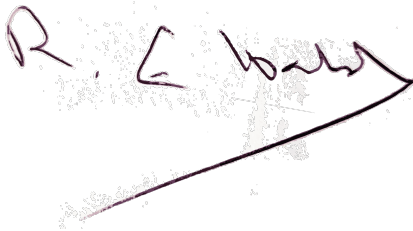
As a whole group, we explored Friends experience of peace work. We heard how Ghent Worship Group discerned their response to the war in Ukraine, which involved the entire meeting in collectively writing an opinion piece about Conscientious Objectors and working with the European Bureau for Conscientious Objectors (EPCO BEOC), to support Conscientious Objectors in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. We will consider if this concern to support Conscientious Objectors from these countries can be similarly adopted for our whole Yearly Meeting.

In conclusion

Although all of our sessions varied in content and approach, each has served to remind us that very different structures and attitudes can meet and embrace each other and yet retain their individual character, and at the same time respect the different nature of the other.

(We hope that this can finally be the case with our meeting.)

Signed in and on behalf of Belgium and Luxembourg Yearly meeting, 11 June 2023.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'R. Harland', with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right and then curves back under the signature.

Ruth Harland, Clerk

Submitted by epistle drafting committee of Eoin Dubsy, Phil Gaskell, Nick Rendle, Emmanuelle Verhagen

The full text of Sister Marianne Goffoel’s speech can be read here:

[One foot in the Kingdom 2023](#)

[Un pied dans le Royaume.... 2023](#)

[Eén voet in het Koninkrijk 2023](#)