

Contribution to EMES Annual Report 2013: European and Middle East Young Friends (EMEYF) 2013

2013 Has been a bustling and dynamic year for EMEYF and full of changes and experiments. We have gathered for three main events: EMEYF's Spring Gathering in the Yorkshire Dales explored the connection between our spirituality and creativity. We met again in the summer for an all-age EMEYF Open House in Congénies, France, and lastly in autumn for our Annual Meeting in Brussels. For 2014 we are looking forward to a joint EMEYF–QCEA Study tour where we expect a strong presence of Young Friends, followed by our Spring Gathering in Macedonia, on the theme "Borders – within and without".

Please pass details of EMEYF to those Young Adult Friends aged 18-to-35ish in your meetings. Our EMEYF website www.emeyf.org has details of all events and allows Young Friends to subscribe to the mailing list for staying informed.

Gatherings are very important for many of us as these allow us to build friendships, explore our spirituality and leadings, and care for each other on our individual and communal journeys. Some Young Friends feel at home in their local Quaker communities, but lonely at the same time, so are looking forward to EMEYF gatherings as their other "home" meeting. Young Friends are not Friends who are not yet fully grown, not yet fully arrived—but Friends who are facing decisions about how they want to live their life and what difference they want to make. This can be a harsh and radical situation and a struggle at times. Being held and uplifted by community, company and spiritual friendship enables us to experience this as a chance and as a gift: we are aware of the impact each of our choices has to us and the world, and we are aware of being on a journey. Our faith is not easy, it is about this radicality and openness and the willingness to learn and grow. Because of this, our Gatherings are intense experiences—with deep worship, intimate connections and hilarious fun. This is us - living and celebrating the Quaker way.

Young Friends all over the section are finding their voices and leadings in their local and yearly meetings. As Young Friends, we know that we might be the future of the Religious Society, but for sure we are part of its present as well. In discerning EMEYF's relationship with other Quaker organisations, we understood why there are often misunderstandings: We want to be heard and seen, in our Quaker way, but not as "young people". We want to be heard as full-grown members of our community, who are on their spiritual journey, like other Friends of all generations, across the Ages.

In our meetings for worship for business and in our committees, we are working on keeping EMEYF going and making EMEYF better. We try to become more vivid and open, both to the spirit and to the enthusiasm of Young Friends in the Section. In 2013, we focused on how to follow our passions and encourage ourselves and others to bring in and share gifts and leadings. This led to discernments on our understanding of roles, our relationship to other Quaker organisations and to a new-style Open House event in the summer.

This phase of transition does not go without difficulties, and it took a lot of energy especially from those working on our committees. At the moment, EMEYF does not

have a clerk. EMEYF's Communication Committee has entered a period of grounding and discernment about the way we work together as a committee and how to serve the wider community of EMEYF. Next year, we will need to fill some roles and find ways to make the roles more accessible to Young Friends, as well as to restructure our finances and funding, because our JRCT grant is ending. But we remain uplifted by the experience of the Young Friends meeting, sharing and supporting each other all over the section.

The **Spring Gathering in Ribbleshead, in the Yorkshire Dales**, brought EMEYF back to the area where Quakerism started. For those of us who came over from Continental Europe, visiting the old Meeting House in Settle was very impressive. Local Friends welcomed us and offered us situations to learn, have fun, explore and give back: we heard talks about the area, visited the meeting house, the nature reserve and did some secret caving, and spent a day volunteering on an organic farm. The Leaveners visited us for a day-long workshop inspired by our theme: "The Body Electric - Exploring our spirituality through creativity". We explored our community, the landscape, our spirituality and our creativity—as four shades of the same light. To quote from the report (which can be found on our website in full):

"Through workshops with the Leaveners, we explored how we use our bodies – to interact, to share emotion, to mirror one another and create relationships. We played games, becoming playful with each other, laughing at the frankly ridiculous noises we made at each other, and becoming intensely aware of each other in space. We created living statues with our bodies, representing hope, justice, truth and light. And finally we explored why we are creative, and why we are spiritual. For many, the two were, are, inextricably linked: "When I am creative I am silent, and when I am silent I am spiritual." For some, creativity provides an outlet for deep-felt emotions, and spirituality provides time to process this. Both allow connection to others, through shared interpretations of words and thoughts as well as art. [...] I suppose if I had to sum up the Gathering in three words it would have to be singing, laughter and silence. We sang almost constantly; whilst cooking, walking, digging earth or making friendship bracelets. There was always a melody in the air, and always a harmony quick to follow. 'We are a gentle, angry people and we are singing, singing for our lives.' And we laughed; at ourselves, at each other and at our mistakes, but also for our delightful successes, in celebration of an absurd moment, and at the joy of being together. Most of all, we appreciated the chance to be silent, to raise ourselves and each other to heights of spiritual contemplation we had not necessarily anticipated, and to be accepted for our desire to do so. We gathered together in song, in laughter and in silence. What greater gift can there be?"

The epistle from SG 2013 is a soundscape created from words shared and spoken throughout the Gathering, of songs, games, the wind, the river and the caves. Please listen to the full epistle: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHpWHVSAAnDY>

At Spring Gathering, we also discerned ways for EMEYFers to do what they feel enthusiastic about. An idea was born when we were talking about our wish to experience community with Friends, and we made it happen only a few months later: The **EMEYF Open House in Congénies (France)** was an invitation to all Friends and

attenders to spend some time together—regardless of their nationality, background and their age. In fact, there were nearly 70 years of age difference between the youngest and the oldest participant!

We enjoyed the summer in the South of France and the hospitality of the local Friends. Also, we learnt a lot about openness, just by living it: To be open to other people is sometimes challenging, but also enriching. It is a training for the openness towards the spirit. As individuals as well as communities, we were adventurous enough to not stay in our comfort zone, we made ourselves vulnerable—and found a much more valuable form of comfort, of which our minute of record tells:

"Our Open House has brought together people from all over Europe, Quaker and non-Quaker, who are all ages and speak many different languages. Despite such differences we found, and continue to find, ways to not just communicate together but to come together as a whole group; a family—one that keeps expanding! With no set time schedule we have challenged ourselves in creating our event as a community. All participants had and found a role in contributing to the event. In this, we have had the young people taking care for the older in organising a hike in the woods; and we have learnt that age does not matter. We have been transformed and blessed by this community. We treasure the safety and the security we have built together, and we celebrate the way we have taken care for each other."

(Full text on www.emeyf.org)

In autumn, we have again been welcomed at Quaker House in Brussels by QCEA for our **EMEYF Annual Meeting**. We focused on our relationship with FWCC–EMES and QCEA, and welcomed Marisa Johnson and Alexandra Bosbeer who both talked about their work. We explored new ways of working together, from which sprung the idea for the joint EMEYF–QCEA Study Tour 2014. We are aware that our current transitions ask flexibility from the people and organisations with whom we work together and we are thankful for their support and understanding.

In short, we tried to be adventurous in the way we are living together, because we realize that being open for the needs of a community of Young Adults, dispersed over Europe, needs the willingness to change as well as to care for our roots. We continue to explore our faith and our tasks in life by seeking each others' F/friendship in community. We are thankful to the people, meetings and organisations who are supporting us spiritually and financially while we are finding our voices. We hope you will be following us with interest and hold us in the light as we approach the new adventures that are in store for us in 2014.

(Mieke van Opheusden and Esther Köhring, EMEYF Elders)