

## **EMEYF Special Gathering 2020 Epistle**

Dear Friends everywhere...

... this year, we were not able to hold our Summer Gathering in Finland as we planned and looked forward to, due to the Covid19 outbreak. We still wanted to connect and meet and were therefore contemplating about what we need and how we can answer these needs in a new way this year. Pretty quickly we realized that an online gathering was the best and the safest choice for us this time. Our impromptu planning committee was able to create a space with different rooms which made us connect how we needed it: creating togetherness, creating community and spending time together. While going online was a necessity, our priorities in the way we approached this were our choice.

We did not know how this event would turn out, as it had to be so different from our usual gatherings... and we were positively surprised! The special connection between us was there, even with this very different way of being together.

We started to feel like a community already after the opening session - not just like pixelated pictures on a screen. We came together after the experience of several months of reduced social contact, everyone wanting this to work, craving connection. The digital 'venue' with different rooms made it easy to be at a place and be present. We felt like the venue made the place 'real' even if at that point no other people were online in the room. We also realized how much care and attention is needed to enable community, especially when meeting online - it is amazing what technologies are available, but even more what community can do. The words "The spirit is in the detail" stayed with us over the week. And when one main session had to be postponed due to technical issues, we just stayed together and played the game someone suggested.

Meeting online was not without challenges, though. It was much harder to 'see' the people who were not present during the sessions than it would have been in an in-person community like Spring Gatherings, and at times it was hard to connect throughout the day, as we didn't know who would be online at what time exactly. As the week progressed, we became more confident and started using the platform for conversation in between sessions as well. Implementing and planning these inspired moments was harder than planning the sessions themselves, so we were glad to see that over time and with trust, this happened.

The online gathering not only brought challenges but also came with advantages. For example, it enabled several people to attend who said they couldn't have come to a gathering in Finland. Not only was the gathering easier to combine with the demands of daily life, but being able to attend it from your own home also lowered the threshold for several newcomers. This made us consider different ways of making future gatherings more accessible by using digital or hybrid forms of worship. Reflections on this were also shared when Michael Eccles visited and led a discussion about the ways meetings in the Europe and Middle East Section (EMES) are staying in contact, worshipping and coming together. Some Friends appreciated the freedom of attending just a few sessions and nonetheless being a part of the community. Throughout the week, we experienced a steady attendance, with all sessions or meetings being attended by at least a small group of Young Friends. In total, more than 25 Young Friends were a part of the gathering.

During the week, we had sessions in the evening and early morning activities like Yoga and Meeting for Worship, while spending the day in our workplaces, with our families and (non-EMEYF)-friends. Because the gathering took place in the midst of Friends' everyday lives, some everyday life impressions were blending into the gathering and vice versa. People from our everyday life did eventually notice that we were doing activities together and we

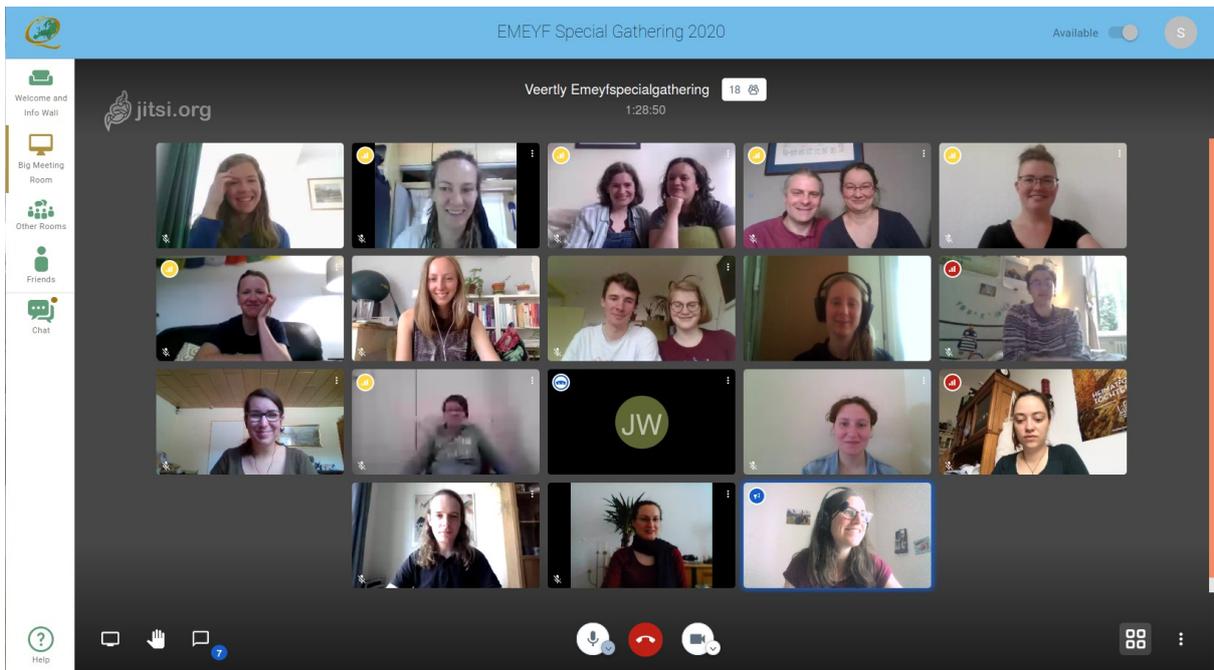
were able to share interesting conversations about our gathering and our community with "outside people", which we otherwise maybe would not have had. Carrying the gathering with us and incorporating it in our daily lives also allowed us to see each other differently, as part of other communities and in our daily spaces, outside of the exceptional time and space of an in person gathering: We got to see each other's kitchens and living rooms, pets, partners, and housemates, which gave the gathering a very homey feel. :)

The digital setup of the special gathering also allowed us to easily welcome external speakers, to share their stories and concerns with us. Edouard Dommen from Geneva challenged us to think non-anthropocentrically about the world, and we looked at this together, from different perspectives, growing in our understanding and awareness: How can we extend the community of neighbours that we think of when we intend to 'love our neighbours'? How is our view of the world and how are our actions for the environment changed when we stop thinking in terms of stewardship, but understand ourselves interwoven in human-nonhuman connections and networks? Some of us were inspired to start conversations about how we and our meetings are sometimes anthropocentric (maybe without being aware of it).

Matthias Schwerendt from Berlin shared his memories and reflections on being a Young Friend in the GDR and when the wall came down, asking what it means to be a (Young) Quaker in a Europe that is changing all around us. We heard about the close community of East German Young Friends, about the joys of international contacts and intervisitation, but also about the difficulties in growing together, as their experience differed from those of Western Young Friends. We spoke about what keeps us going and how conflicts within Quaker communities can be attended to, and Matthias reminded us of the importance of listening. This thought-provoking session created conversation and connection between the current and former generation of "Young" European Friends, then and now.

In other sessions and activities we enjoyed the opportunity to connect and catch up, such as when we were cooking a Mung Dal with Raita together, each in our own kitchen. While some of us were already eating, others were still cooking or in conversation. We appreciated the shared activities and the freedom that comes with a communal rhythm of the day, including variations, without the need to sync our activities too much. These sessions, as well as our virtual Meeting for Worship, created a sense of "together togetherness": on Veertly, in a meeting room, looking at each other. Other activities that were offered to use the week as a retreat created a sense of "separate togetherness": We had daily challenges on the topic of "Nature and Spirituality", which encouraged us to leave the house, searching for water and sitting with trees or harvesting fruits. Pictures of our adventures were shared in a messenger group. We sent each other postcards to create a 'tangible' memory of this online event. We looked after each other in homegroups. It felt special and important to take time out of our week for our community and our faith.

We hope that the connections between us will continue to strengthen and grow, virtually and in person.



*Gathering group picture in our virtual venue*

*A selection of daily challenge photos from the gathering signal group:*

