

WATCHING BRIEF 20-6: QUAKERS AND PEACE

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

14 July 2020

This Brief deals with the origins and development of the Quaker Peace Testimony over the years since Quakers began as a movement in the mid-17th century in England. It points to areas of recent thought and action among Quakers around the world, and offers ideas for personal and group witness.

Origins

- George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement (The Religious Society of Friends, as it is more correctly titled) said that he lived “in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars”. He added that he “was come into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strife were”. This suggests a clear understanding of the Christian message as one of peace, as indeed was the view of the early church.
- Peter Brock has written an excellent history of the Quaker approach to *peace* (*The Quaker Peace Testimony*, 1997). He points out that many of those who joined the Quakers in the mid-17th century were in fact still in Cromwell’s army until they were thrown out for dissent. The Peace Testimony was issued in 1661 to Charles II at a time when the movement was suspected of being involved in plots against the King. The testimony itself said that “we do utterly deny...all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons for any end or under any presence whatsoever”. They saw this belief as based on the Spirit of Christ which would transform the world through the lives of his followers.
- The Sermon on the Mount was seen as the source of a radical commitment to love others and to live peaceably with them. Of course, as with most movements, individual members varied in their adherence to the testimony. It was an era of intense and ongoing military activity, that included raising taxes for war, and those who defied this (e.g. Quakers) were often gaoled and had their goods seized.

- An important early leader of the movement, William Penn, had a broad vision of peace. He wrote about world peace, using a blend of idealism and realism. He highlighted the positive aspects of peace as a source of stability and wealth: peace requires justice based on good laws. He proposed the creation of a body representing the European states, meeting annually to draw up rules of international conduct and settle disputes. It was not a pacifist plan. He aimed to “persuade the rulers of Europe to adopt measures for safeguarding the peace of the war-torn continent without requiring them to abandon their reliance on military defence as a last resort”. One of his famous phrases was “Let us try what Love can do”. He objected strongly to the idea that the end justified the means.
- The American colony of Pennsylvania (begun by William Penn) itself started as a religious experiment and showed the dilemmas of a pacifist principle being worked out in a situation of government, where military force was expected. A reform movement within Quakerism emerged, focussing especially on John Woolman, to re-assert the peace testimony. He worked for peace, anti-slavery, indigenous justice, and better labour conditions. The reformers advocated war tax resistance, thus putting themselves at odds with those Quakers in the government. Some Quakers resigned from the government but the controversy over pacifism and government continued for years. In the American Revolution period, Quakers were generally against the revolution, largely because they refused to take part in a war. As a result they suffered much abuse and scorn from patriots. At the time of the Civil War, Quakers supported the Union and the abolition of slavery, but were in favour of nonviolent action.
- The history of the Quaker movement showed from its beginnings the variation of approaches adopted by different members. This is consistent with the basic view that each person must work out their own path in conformity with their inner leadings. A good example of this is conscientious objection to military service. Many Friends have refused to take up arms on behalf of the State, believing that their loyalty to the Spirit of Christ is more important. There is now acceptance in most countries of the right to conscientious objection to military service on religious grounds.
- In more recent years there has been a significant interest in conscientious objection to paying war taxes. Some Friends have calculated that portion of their tax that will go to military defence and refused to pay it, donating the equivalent amount to some peaceful cause. As a result some Friends have had their goods confiscated.
- Over the years Friends have been very active in work for peacemaking. They have been prominent in such well-known peace groups as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Amnesty International, the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, War Resisters, and the Alternatives to Violence Project. They have been strongly committed to peace education in schools and the community, to restorative justice and prison reform, to conflict resolution, to promoting human rights and economic and social justice, and to supporting the League of Nations and the United Nations.

Quaker International Organisations and Ventures

Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) aims to encourage fellowship and understanding among all the branches of the Religious Society of Friends. FWCC brings Friends together in multiple ways to celebrate God in our lives, to gather the Quaker voice and build networks to address issues of our time, and to unite us within our diversity. FWCC organizes its work through its four section offices and the World Office, collaborating and encouraging the work of each section and work across sections. The World Office uniquely represents all Friends at the global level, offering Quakers the chance to contribute to world affairs. An example is sending representatives to meetings of the United Nations Crime and Justice body based in Vienna.

The Quaker Institute for the Future (QIF) organizes and coordinates research projects, through seminars, workshops and study groups. It “envisions a global future in which humanity is in right relationship with the commonwealth of life”. Its principal emphases are – inclusion, social and economic justice, ecological wellbeing, and participatory research and discernment. Areas of concern are policies that strengthen Earth’s capacity to support life; bringing governance of the common good into the use of technology; reducing structural violence, reversing segregation; and moving from aggressive individualism to practices of cooperation, wealth sharing, and the common good. See www.quakerinstitute.org

The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) represents the Quaker movement at the United Nations. With two offices (New York and Geneva), QUNO staff work with people in the UN, multilateral organisations, government delegations, and non-governmental organisations, to achieve changes in international standards and practice. Through informal luncheons and meetings, Quakers provide a space for working on difficult issues out of the public eye. Quakers are known for speaking out against injustice and war - issues that are incompatible with the vision of a world in which peace and justice prevail. The work is rooted in the Quaker testimonies of peace, truth, justice, equality, and simplicity. See www.quno.org

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has a worldwide scope for its activities in support of peace and justice. Based in Philadelphia USA, AFSC describes itself as “a Quaker organization devoted to service, development, and peace programs throughout the world. Their work is based on the belief in the worth of every person, and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice”. AFSC partners with individuals and communities around the world who are courageously pursuing justice and peace, often under the most difficult circumstances. Together, these efforts demonstrate the power of nonviolence to overcome injustice, violence, discrimination, and exploitation. Priority areas are – international peacebuilding, creating inclusive communities, building economic justice, and defending immigrant rights. AFSC has run programs in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and throughout USA. See www.afsc.org

Quaker Peace and Social Witness is a British-based agency which supports Quakers who are led by faith to take action of peace and social justice. Peace activism includes disarmament, peace education, conciliation, and supporting peace workers.in accompaniment programs in Palestine/Israel and East Africa and conciliation work in South Asia. Within the UK, areas of concern are migration, housing, crime, economic justice, and sustainability. See www.quaker.org.uk

Friends Peace Teams (FPT) works around the world to develop long-term relationships with communities in conflict to create programs for peacebuilding, healing and reconciliation. Specific initiatives include the African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) that works on grassroots peace activities in Burundi, Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda); the Asia West Pacific Initiative (FPT-AWP) that seeks to offer opportunities for service in that region; and the Peacebuilding in Latin America (PLA) that promotes peace and healing in Central and South America where the legacy of civil war, poverty and injustice continues to harm people's lives. In our region annual peace training is offered, and there is a focus on engaging young people in creating cultures of peace. See www.friendspeaceteams.org

Alternatives to Violence Project International (AVP) is a training program enabling participants to deal with potentially violent situations in new and creative ways. Interactive exercises, discussions, games, and role plays help examine how people respond to injustice and prejudice, and how to approach such challenges nonviolently. It relies on three principles – expect the best, think before reacting, and ask for a nonviolent path. It has branches in many countries, including Australia. An AVP workshop is an intensive 20-hour structured workshop of experiential exercises and group processes. We have four primary types of workshops: the Basic Workshops, the Advanced Workshop, the Training for Facilitators Workshop, and the Trauma Awareness Workshop. See <http://avp.international>

Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) is a Quaker lobby organization in the USA. It seeks to bring spiritual values and Friends' testimonies to bear on public policy decisions at Federal level. Founded in 1943, it has succeeded in building strong relationships with members of Congress over the years. It was instrumental in the formation of the Peace Corps in 1961, and the Civil Rights Act in 1964. It seeks common ground and mutual trust across all parties. Its areas of focus are Peace, Justice for All, Community, and Environment. It has ongoing links with Quakers around the USA to ensure its priorities accord with those of Friends. It has periodic gatherings of Friends from around the country in Washington DC to lobby on particular concerns.

Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee (QPLC) is the national peace committee for Australian Quakers. Based in Canberra in recent years, its role is to monitor international and national legislation and government policies and actions relevant to Quaker concerns, keep Friends informed, and make representations on their behalf. See www.quakersaustralia.info/organisation/aym/quaker-peace-and-legislation-committee

The range of activities in which QPLC is active includes:

- Producing and distributing *Watching Briefs* and *Action Alerts* about peace-related issues. In the past year the themes covered include lethal autonomous weapons, protecting whistleblowers, the UN human rights commission, the death penalty, social (nonviolent) defence, West Papua, foreign fighters, sustainable development goals, and climate change and the Pacific. These documents give up-to-date information, Quaker and other perspectives, analysis and ideas for action.
- Preparing submissions and letters to the Government and Parliament on behalf of Australian Friends on matters of concern. During the past year, the major one has been on proposed religious freedom legislation which is potentially divisive and discriminatory against minorities. Other topics have been the welfare of refugees in detention, children born to foreign fighters stranded in Syria, and Australia's record on human rights.

- Offering workshops on lobbying, to assist Quakers in approaching political representatives on current issues of concern. After a national workshops in Canberra in March 2018, a workshop was held in Victoria in February 2020.
- Working with other peace groups, such as the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN), the International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), and the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN).
- Maintaining regular communication with Quakers groups around Australia, and links with international agencies such as the Quaker United Nations Offices.

Quakers individually and together work on a wide range of concerns, including the justice for refugees, human rights, climate change, care for the homeless and disadvantaged in our society, restorative justice, domestic and family violence, anti-war programs, ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, gender issues, racial prejudice, and prison reform.

Areas of Potential Peacemaking

As the result of an on-line conversation among QPLC members and Quakers from Regional Meetings around Australia, held on 28 May 2020, the following emerged as areas for peacemaking:

- Spirit-led advocacy and witness.
- Remaining faithful to the testimonies while engaging in the wider world.
- War powers legislation.
- Militarisation, military spending.
- Human rights.
- Social justice for disadvantaged groups.
- Economic reconstruction.
- Gender awareness and equality.
- Civil society responsibilities as a Quaker.
- Intersections with climate crisis and original people's issues.
- Supporting young people in finding their voice.

QPLC will build upon these insights in its future work.

A final thought from Adam Curle, Quaker founder of the University of Bradford School of Peace Studies, UK.

The effects of our actions are largely beyond our control. Any happening they may influence has multiple causes that can never be unraveled: the contribution of what we did is as hard to assess as that of a single strand in a rope. We must have faith that if we purify our hearts making our motives more compassionate, what we do will strengthen unimaginably the great forces that can save humanity.

Canberra

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