

The Quaker Testimonies

Our beliefs

The testimonies are about the way Quakers try to lead their lives. This attempt to put faith into practice, often with great difficulty, arises from an understanding of certain values and principles that are central to the Quaker faith. This leaflet tries to explain the spirit behind the testimonies and what they mean in practice.

Quakers' understanding of faith is that true human fulfillment comes from an attempt to live life in the spirit of love and truth and peace, answering that of God in everyone. These beliefs spring from a sense of equality, compassion and seeing the sacred in all life. The testimonies are about Quakers' commitment to those beliefs. Naturally, our day-to-day practice of them faces us with many dilemmas and compromises. Indeed the testimonies are often out of step with the way that many other people think and act and so may seem idealistic.

The testimonies arise out of a deep, inner conviction and challenge our normal ways of living. They do not exist in any rigid, written form; nor are they imposed in any way. All Quakers have to search for the ways in which the testimonies can become true for themselves. The testimonies also reflect the society we live in, and so have changed over time. Early Quakers had testimonies against outward symbols, taking oaths and the payment of tithes, and about peace, temperance, moderation and forms of address. Later, testimonies evolved with regard to slavery, integrity in business dealings, capital punishment and prison reform, nonviolence and conscientious objection to military service.

As the testimonies come from "leadings of the Spirit", this may mean taking a stand against common social practices. The interaction between faith and action, as expressed in the testimonies, is at the heart of Quaker spiritual experience and living.

The challenge today

We live at a time of unparalleled scientific progress and extraordinary change. Modern communication and economic development mean that people, countries and economies have now become much more interlinked and less isolated. Such interdependence can be both enriching and threatening. The gap between rich and poor in many countries (our own included), and between the richest and poorest countries, is widening. Injustice, insensitivity, misunderstanding, desperation and dislocation and the clash of cultures mean that all societies face huge challenges, both from within and from without. We need to play our part in a process of genuine understanding, tolerance, reaching out and inclusiveness that draws heavily on the underlying spiritual values of the testimonies. Only in that way can we get beyond the hatred and division that is perpetuated by a military response to, for example, terrorist events.

Since we are all responsible for the society we live in, we must examine the nature of that society. How far does it encourage love, compassion, justice, simplicity, peacefulness and truth? Do wealth, success and power lead to true happiness and fulfillment? And do we recognise in the natural world something which is precious in its own right? We cannot

ignore the effects of our actions, however indirect, on other people and on nature in our shrinking world.

The testimonies

The following is a brief account of some of the best known testimonies.

Truth and integrity

Friends have long tried to live out the importance of truth in every aspect of life. Truth is an integral part of our testimony to the Light that is within us all. We can only be true to our innermost sense of spiritual harmony if we are faithful to the truth and honest in our dealings. This is all the more important in today's complex social, political and economic system, where these values can so easily be lost to sight. Truth and integrity are therefore something that Quakers regard as fundamental guiding principles not just in their own lives but also in public affairs.

Equality and community

The Quaker testimony to equality stems from the conviction that all people are of equal spiritual worth. This was reflected in the early days of Quakerism by the equal spiritual authority of women, and by the refusal to use forms of address that recognised social distinctions. Equality is also a fundamental characteristic of Quaker organisation and worship, with the lack of clergy and any formal hierarchy.

This belief in equality and sharing is in conflict with the spirit of a materialistic and individualistic age. Where the sense of mutual obligation is weakened this quickly leads to despair, crime and alienation. The testimony to equality is concerned with the way in which our own life-styles and behaviour increase inequalities. It covers such matters as social inclusion, ethical investment, seeking to ensure that those who produce goods (especially in poor countries) receive fair payment, the avoidance of exploitation and discrimination, work with the homeless, asylum-seekers, refugees and prisoners, and prison reform. It is also a testimony of particular relevance in a multicultural and increasingly complex society in which there is an acute need for racial justice and for empathy between all faiths.

Simplicity

The testimony to simplicity is integral to Quaker faith: our spiritual responsiveness depends on being as free as possible from dependence on material security. Quakers therefore seek to resist the temptation to define their place in society by acquiring possessions. In so far as we are led towards true simplicity we will increasingly be called to dissent from much of what the modern world stands for.

Simplicity is not just about possessions but also about attitudes. Because of their integrity in business dealings, many early Friends prospered in business, especially in the 19th-century. The wealth they accumulated was not, however, sought for its own sake but was often used for the wider benefit of society and especially the dispossessed. We live much less simply than our forebears a hundred years ago, or than people in most other countries in the world. Simplicity involves constantly challenging the way we live and what our true needs are, and especially how our own standard of living is sometimes achieved at

the expense of others. It means standing aside from the fuelling of wants and manufacturing of new desires.

Peace

The peace testimony is probably the best-known testimony, both within and outside the Religious Society of Friends. It derives from our conviction that love is at the heart of existence. Again, there is no set form of words, but Friends are deeply attached to the Declaration made to Charles II in 1660, which begins: “We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fighting with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever.” It has been the Quaker experience over the centuries “to live in the life and power which takes away the occasion of all wars”.

We do not assume that we can escape from the realities of a world in which violence appears so deeply rooted. We are, however, constantly challenged by the existence of weapons of mass destruction, the number and intensity of violent conflicts, the cycles of poverty, alienation and violence that destroy peace in many deprived communities, and apparently random acts of terrorism. Whatever the discouragement, it is essential for Friends to be true to their principles and to show that there is another way of conducting human affairs and resolving conflicts non-violently. In many cases this will involve difficult choices and Friends may find themselves troubled in conscience in trying to discern what is right in such areas as peace-keeping.

Seen in the long sweep of history, however, much has been achieved. The peace testimony involves thinking and uttering the unthinkable, in the conviction that this may lead to a fundamental shift in attitudes. What is idealistic in one generation becomes a cherished right or precept in the next. The peace testimony also means working for forgiveness and reconciliation and dwelling in a sense of our shared humanity.

More specifically, Quaker witness led to a recognition of the right to conscientious objection to military service and has involved relief and ambulance work in war-stricken areas. Quakers played a significant part in working towards the recent international moves to ban child soldiers, and were behind the establishment of the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University. More generally, there has been a move away from the popular glorification of war towards seeing warfare for the moral abomination that it is.

The earth and environment

A testimony is not a form of words but an expression of actions characteristic of Friends. New testimonies emerge as the reasons for them and the underlying spiritual basis of action become clarified. One such area concerns our stewardship of the environment. For many Quakers what has been an “emerging” testimony to the environment has now become an established one, with close links to the peace testimony and the testimony to simplicity.

The world is a wonderfully rich resource for our material and spiritual needs. We should treasure it and preserve its capacity to sustain and inspire. That, in turn, calls for a creative responsibility towards the earth we have inherited and for proper sharing. It means seeing “that of God” in the natural world around us, and being moved by considerations other than commercial gain. Habitats and species are sacrificed to products

and services which often are far from essential. The future is constantly sacrificed to the present and the needs of others to the wants of the self. It cannot be right to leave the world poorer than we found it in beauty or in the rich diversity of life forms, or to consume recklessly in the knowledge that our actions are bound to lead to future tragedy.

Living our testimonies

Quakers recognise that their testimonies go against many of the current strands of economic, social and political change. This may, therefore, mean dissenting from fundamental aspects of the contemporary social order. It means living out our testimonies so as to hold up an alternative vision of deep human fulfillment. One way of doing so is to share with one another our practice of living our testimonies in accordance with our beliefs much more openly and adventurously, in a spirit of faithful discipleship.

Together with others who share these fundamental values, we need to keep alive an alternative vision of society centred on meeting real human and spiritual needs rather than ever-changing desires; a society where inequalities of wealth and power are small enough for there to be true equality between people as children of God; a society which, mindful of the quality of life and needs of future generations, limits its use of natural resources to what is sustainable; a society which is content with sufficiency rather than excess; and a society in which justice and truth are the basis for social peace and community.

Doing so means holding firm to the core testimony to the sacramental nature of every aspect of life. Individually and corporately, we must practise spiritual discernment. We will stumble, we will make mistakes, our vision will be limited. We may be called to a style of living and a generosity of giving that we cannot yet attain. But we seek to engage with others and the natural world as part of a wider spiritual consciousness. In the depths of our silent waiting we find the place where words and deeds are one; our faith and our action are indivisible.