

The Quaker peace testimony



Contents

1.
Introduction
2.
Timeline: Quaker work for peace
4.
Background to the declaration to Charles II
6.
Individual Quakers' witness to peace
8.
The spiritual basis of our peace testimony
10.
Quaker peace organisations in Britain
12.
What you can do
13.
Activities around the 350th anniversary
of the declaration to Charles II

Large print format available:
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Introduction

From early in our history, Quakers have taken a clear stand for peace and against military action. The words we have written, and action we have taken in opposition to war and in support of peace, have come to be known as the Quaker “peace testimony”:

This booklet has been made to celebrate the first written declaration of a Quaker commitment to peace, a declaration by early Quakers in January 1661 to Charles II. However, the peace testimony has always been more than that. It is an active expression of our understanding of the nature of how we should live in this world: an understanding that comes from our experiences of meeting together in worship – periods of collective quiet prayer and reflection. It is an evolving expression of an insight at the heart of our approach to faith, challenging us in every generation.

We call it a “testimony” because it is how we witness to the world about our beliefs. Our experience is that everyone can respond to and express the living spirit of God within us.

We try to live out our commitment to peace in our daily lives and in our work, individually and together. Sometimes, we set up and support long-term individual and collective Quaker action as an expression of our peace testimony. At other times, simply “bearing witness” to a different way – a way that affirms the value of all life rather than denies it through warfare – is all we can do as individuals. But this too is an important part of our testimony.

Our peace testimony is not simple, and not all Quakers will have the same understanding of what it will lead them to do in any given situation. Above all, based on our understanding of God’s love, our peace testimony is about paying attention to all relationships, from those with family and neighbours to those between nations. It is an opportunity to undo some of the hurt in this world and to build a better future.

Timeline: Quaker work for peace

This timeline illustrates some of the Quaker work for peace that has gone on over the last 350 years.

1661 – The declaration to Charles II distances Quakers from the Fifth Monarchists and declares that Quakers “utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons”.

1693 – William Penn writes his influential “An essay towards the present and future peace of Europe”.

1807 – The Slave Trade Act makes slavery illegal in Britain: Quakers had campaigned for the ban for many years.

1813 – Elizabeth Fry’s first visit to Newgate Prison. Her concern for the welfare of prisoners causes a revolution in thinking about prison conditions.

1830s to 1860s – The Underground Railroad is developed in secret in America to help slaves escape from the southern states.

1846 to 1847 – Quakers help in the relief of the Irish Famine.

1852 – John Bright, MP for Manchester, delivers a moving speech to the House of Commons in opposition to the Crimean War.

1854 – Quakers send a peace delegation to Czar Nicholas to mediate over the Crimean War.

1870 – Quakers set up the Friends War Victims Relief Committee



1914 – The Friends Ambulance Unit is founded, in which many serve as an alternative to military service.



1916 to 1918 – Conscription starts in Britain and, as well as opposing this, many Friends are conscientious objectors to military service and are imprisoned or sent to do “work of national importance” such as farming or mining.

1918 – Three members of Friends Service Committee are imprisoned for publishing anti-war material without submitting it to the censor.

1947 – The Friends Service Council and American Friends Service Committee accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of Quakers around the world.

1950 onwards – Quaker opposition to nuclear weapons begins to build. Friends take part in marches to Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Establishment throughout the 1950s and 60s.

1972 – The Quaker-sponsored School of Peace Studies is opened at the University of Bradford.

1979 – Friends take part in marches at Greenham Common against cruise missiles.

1982 – Twenty-five members of Quaker staff ask their employer, Meeting for Sufferings, to withhold that proportion of their tax that would fund war preparations, until assured that it would be used for non-military purposes. Meeting for Sufferings accepts the request and challenges the law in court, unsuccessfully.

Find out more: Library of the Society of Friends
www.quaker.org.uk/library or 020 7663 1135

Background to the declaration to Charles II

Why did twelve Quakers make the declaration to Charles II in the first place?

After the restoration of the monarchy on 29 May 1660, Thomas Venner led a Fifth Monarchy uprising in London early in January 1660/1, with street battles with soldiers and about forty deaths. Venner and his followers were pursued and captured, tried at the Old Bailey and executed on 19 January 1660/1. The failure of Venner's rising was associated with repressive legislation aimed at the suppression of all nonconformist sects.

elves more then lovers of God, lust, kil; and desire to have mens Lives or Estates, ariseth from the Lust. All bloody Principles & Practises we(as to our own particular) do utterly deny,with all outward wars & strife,& fightings with outward Weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our Testimony to the whole world.

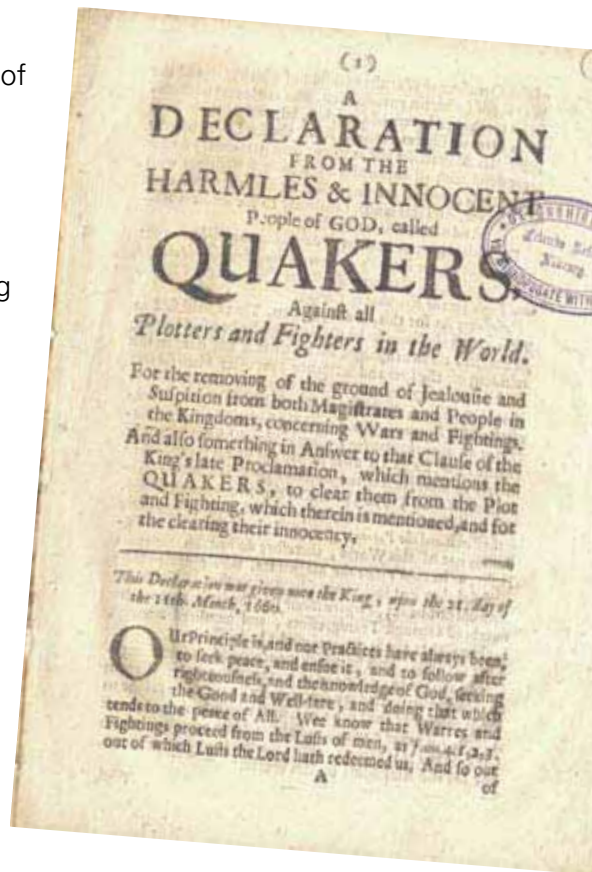
On 10 January the king outlawed meetings of Fifth Monarchy Men, Baptists and Quakers, and all members were required to take an oath of allegiance. It was now dangerous to pass through the streets and letters were intercepted. George Fox speaks in his journal of "soe much breaking uppe of meetings after ye monarchy men had risen". Over 4,000 Friends went to prison.

Once it was seen that the rising had not spread nationwide the measures were relaxed, but an intensified fear of all religious radicalism remained. Several times Margaret Fell went to the King to gain the release of imprisoned Friends, finally gaining an assurance that Friends would be set at liberty without paying fees.

In response to this dramatic situation George Fox and Richard Hubberthorn drew up a declaration "against plots and fightings": "Upon the 21st day of the 11th month 1660"; just a few days after Venner's

execution, Fox and eleven other Quakers signed the declaration and passed it to the newly restored king, Charles II. However, the city authorities took steps to prevent its publication "by a violent and unjust taking away the whole first impression." George Fox recorded the seizure in his journal, noting that it was "taken in the press".

The declaration's full title speaks of "plotters and fighters" as it was written to distance the Quakers from Fifth Monarchists. Its publication marked a shift from individual pacifism to a more explicit, corporate witness among Friends. It can be seen as a political and strategic document, intended to convince others that Quakers, despite their revolutionary religious beliefs, posed no threat because they rejected the use of violence. The statement seems to have been easily accepted by other Quakers and has remained an enduring and distinguishing characteristic of Friends for over 350 years.



Compiled by staff at the Library of the Society of Friends.

Find out more
www.quaker.org.uk/350

Individual Quakers' witness to peace

As a Quaker I feel that war is wrong and contrary to the example that Jesus (and other amazing spiritual leaders) have shown us. I was a conscientious objector in 1942 – I served in the Friends Ambulance Unit for four years. I have ever since demonstrated and given talks and interviews on this subject.

Peter Rutter



“Peace is more than just a word, a slogan, it’s got to be linked to justice and fairness...”

Quakerism is about the focused, considered, practice of peace. In my activism, this translates as seeking to creatively and nonviolently intervene in processes that result in suffering.

Countless Quakers, past and present, have engaged in such action, and in so doing, shown that there can be a difference between justice and lawfulness.

Tim Gee

(Right) Tim Gee superglued to other climate change activists.
Photo: Amelia Gregory



After 28 years of teaching English to non-native speakers, I now not only teach them English but try to show that the values I hold dearly, that of Peace, Love and Truth, inherent in all of us and strengthened and nourished by prayer and worship, are important ingredients in life.

Shanthini Cawson



Shanthini with her mother and sisters



Peace is more than just a word, a slogan, it's got to be linked to justice and fairness because without these there can never be peace in our world. Being a Quaker gave me the strength and the support to put my ideals into action by serving as an ecumenical accompanier in Palestine and Israel.

Andree Ryan



I like to wear my white poppy, and sometimes a red one too, because we should be thinking about peace as well as remembering war. Other children at school ask me about the poppy and say they like it. Saying you are for peace also means I shouldn't punch my sister. I try not to."

Christabel Gregory, aged 8

The spiritual basis of our peace testimony

Our Quaker peace testimony arises out of the conviction that, as George Fox said, there is a “life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.”

Dwelling in the life and power involves opening ourselves to the Inward Light, allowing the Light to shine into all the dark corners where we might find occasion for attacking those who have hurt us.

As we dwell in the life and power, we grow in reverence for life. We recognise that there is “that of God in everyone” and this leads us to renounce violence. We may even adopt the Gandhian principle of *ahimsa* or “non-harm” in relation to all living beings.

Reverence for life leads us not only to avoid doing harm to living beings, but also to nurture life. We not only refuse to kill people, we nurture ourselves and others. This conscientious affirmation of the worth of every human being is the other side of the coin of our conscientious objection to killing people.

We open our eyes to the many forms of violence around us, including the “structural violence” of economic injustice, institutional racism, discrimination against women, and cultural oppression. We open our eyes too to the seeds of war in our own hearts and in our own lives.

We nurture the seeds of peace by responding to hatred, violence and bitterness with acts of love, kindness and forgiveness.

Our faith enables us to work for peace and justice through active non-violence, using the kind of imaginative actions that Jesus proposed in his Sermon on the Mount.

Whenever we are able to respond to conflict creatively and live in peace with each other in spite of our differences, there is cause for celebration. We can sing, dance, play games, tell stories and embrace each other. This is all part of our Quaker spirituality nowadays. But it is the promptings of love and truth in our hearts during a gathered meeting for worship which are the primary spiritual basis of our peace testimony.

Peace grows, as we dwell in that life and power and are obedient to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts. We can be confident that we will be led to live our lives in such a way that we ourselves become a testimony to peace. We can expect to be led as individuals to engage in particular forms of peacemaking. And we can expect to be led corporately to witness to peace as a peace church.

Gordon Matthews, 14 October 2010

Quaker peace organisations in Britain

Within Britain Yearly Meeting, Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) is the lynchpin for much of our peace work – whether it’s campaigning against nuclear weapons, promoting conflict transformation in schools, training in nonviolence or supporting peacebuilders in other parts of the work. Staff at Friends House support fieldworkers in Britain and overseas, but also work closely with the Quaker United Nations Offices in Geneva and New York, and other non-governmental organisations, as well as local meetings.

I’m one of those people lucky enough to live in the part of Britain served by the Northern Friends Peace Board (NFPB). Set up just before the outbreak of war, in 1913, its aim since then has been “to advise and encourage Friends, and through them their fellow citizens, in the active promotion of peace in all its height and breadth.” Always careful to discern how best to address the needs of the time, NFPB is currently working to build peace and tackle racism in local communities and challenge militarism.



The NFPB at a workshop at a conference in Bolton, 2007 on “Tackling Racism, Building Peace”

Quakers can’t be accused of concentrating only on conflicts in other parts of the world. The West Midlands Quaker Peace Education Project operates under the umbrella of Central England Area Meeting. For over twenty years, it has been delivering conflict resolution workshops and training in primary schools, through its Peacemaker Project. This is well-informed, grounded and long-term work, supporting teachers and bringing practical mediation techniques into school communities.

The Newcastle Conflict Resolution Network was set up by Newcastle Quaker Meeting, responding to concerns about increasing levels of violence in the city. It seeks ways to apply conflict resolution to different

aspects of community life – including education, youth work, planning and architecture.



Above: 2003 anti-war march in Winchester

The projects in the West Midlands and Newcastle are just two examples of local Quaker peace work, and there are many more. But Quakers don't necessarily need our own organisations to promote peace, and there are many peace organisations that are not specifically "Quaker" but have Quaker roots, Quaker staff, or Quakers on the board. Quakers played a role in establishing many movements and organisations such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and Campaign Against Arms Trade amongst others.

Juliet Prager

Find out more
Quaker Peace & Social Witness
www.quaker.org.uk/qpsw or 020 7663 1158
Northern Friends Peace Board
<http://nfpb.gn.apc.org> or 01204 382 330
West Midlands Quaker Peace Education Project
www.peacemakers.org.uk or 0121 454 9069
Newcastle Conflict Resolution Network
www.newcastlecrn.org.uk or 0191 280 3312

What you can do

Hopefully, the piece on the spiritual basis of our peace testimony showed how “that of God in everyone” and a love for all creation motivates us to act on our peace testimony. From a letter to an MP to a career-influencing policy, from teaching your children not to respond to violence with violence, to cutting your way into a nuclear base, Quakers are led by the spirit to an astounding spectrum of action for our peace testimony.



If you feel led to act on the peace testimony, or indeed on any part of what Quakerism is to you, then follow that leading. Be inspired not intimidated by the action other Quakers have taken, have confidence in your beliefs and remember all the work talked about in this booklet started because of the concern of Friends. The work Friends have done on peace is so diverse; it is hard to advise what may be of help, but you may want to:

- visit www.quaker.org.uk/disarmament for information, resources and actions to take on disarmament issues, for instance the arms trade and nuclear weapons.
- Contact Quaker Peace & Social Witness for advice on www.quaker.org.uk/qpsw or 020 7663 1158
- look at the online calendar of peace events and action opportunities that Quakers are involved in or are of interest to Friends at www.peaceexchange.org.uk (it also has pages of links to almost every peace group and a page on where to find peace resources)
- find out if someone is already doing something and give them a call.

If you are concerned about an American Base, then try Campaign Against American Bases. If you are worried about your taxes funding war, Conscience do great work on that issue. If no one is doing what you believe needs to be done, start it!

Activities around the 350th anniversary of the declaration to Charles II

Peace 350 years on – what does the peace testimony mean today?



PEACE
350
years on – what does the
peace testimony mean today?

At Britain Yearly Meeting 2010, this workshop pack was launched to give Friends a framework to think about what the peace testimony means today. The pack is designed so a Friend, in membership or an attender, can use it to run the workshop. No expert knowledge about Quaker history, passion about the peace testimony or expertise in running workshops is required. The workshop is also designed to be open to anyone who is interested, and should take about two hours.

These workshops are being run across the country, and as part of it Friends are being asked "What could a 21st century declaration of our peace testimony look like?". The responses will be collected and used to make a contemporary declaration, or something else if that is where the spirit leads Friends. This will be presented to Yearly Meeting Gathering 2011.

Find out more: www.quaker.org.uk/350 or 020 7663 1067

Banners at Yearly Meeting Gathering 2011

As well as presenting the thoughts and outcomes of the workshop, we are calling out to Friends to bring their peace banners to Yearly Meeting Gathering in Canterbury, where we hope to put on a lively display, make new banners with all ages, and hopefully run other sessions around the theme of peace.



Find out more
www.quaker.org.uk/ymsg



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