

# Quaker Peace & Social Witness strategy 2021–2025



## 1. Introduction

Quaker Peace & Social Witness's work draws from the deep spiritual experience of Quakers to build sustained action for peace and justice. For Quakers, this is the meaning of witness – it is living out our faith in the world.

Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) is a department of Britain Yearly Meeting, the central organisation of Quakers in Britain, and our work is guided by Quakers from across Wales, Scotland, England, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

Meeting for Sufferings have set out a vision for the work of the church and charity, and within that Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees have set out six priorities for work: thriving

Quaker communities; a sustainable and peaceful world; simple structures and practices; distinctively Quaker; integrated and well-governed.

This strategy works to all of these, in particular the priority 'A sustainable and peaceful world'. This priority is key for QPSW's work and has guided the development of this strategy, as has the Our faith in the future priority that 'Quaker values are active in the world'.

Our new five-year strategy sets out how we will develop our work to respond to the challenges we face in Britain, and as a global society, as we work to build a more sustainable and peaceful world.

## 2. The world we are living in: our analysis

At the time of writing, in September 2020, we are living in a time of interconnected crises. We see extreme inequalities, reduction in biodiversity and environmental destruction caused by an economic system that exploits people, the Earth and its other inhabitants. This system is upheld by institutions and hierarchies which have historically benefitted from it, and which often discriminate on grounds such as but not limited to race, class and gender. As Britain leaves the EU, it remains unclear how efforts towards peace and climate justice will be impacted, with issues such as interstate relations, Britain's priorities in the world, and environmental standards all likely to change. The roots of violence between people often lie within the interconnected crises which we describe. Around the world, we have seen a rise in overt racism, nationalism and anti-migrant sentiment, fuelled by populist public figures. We see the 'weaponisation' of language, in social and mass media, becoming a potent force for narrowing the 'us' and dehumanising the 'other'. The effects of large-scale injustice are measured in generations, not years, and many of today's armed conflicts and imbalances of power and wealth are linked directly to the ongoing impact of colonialism.

The response to these insecurities has been a rise in militarism and state violence – enforced by armies, police, and through the criminal justice system, even though we know that violent responses do not bring a sustainable peace. Through its arms sales, the UK is directly complicit in armed conflicts that many are not even aware of. Large-scale military procurement and arms exports reinforce a militaristic approach to international problems. There is an erosion of respect and adherence to international laws and institutions, which play an important role in international cooperation, accountability and in promoting human rights. In Britain, the right to peaceful protest,

a key tenet of a democratic society, is under threat.

But against this bleak background, nonviolent movements are emerging worldwide. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Britain, particularly in its early stages, included many examples of individual kindness that help build community. Greater awareness of historical and current human rights violations and oppressions, and of the climate crisis has led to more people, especially younger generations, to become politicised, active and engaged. As public expression of racism and other bigotry is increasing in Britain, many are speaking out, demonstrating a growing understanding of power and privilege, and acting in support of others. A key challenge for campaigners is to engage more people from across the political and social spectrum.

A just and green economy is becoming part of mainstream discourse, while a decade ago it was considered a pipe dream, and a more sophisticated analysis links our economic system with our climate crisis, and with our human wellbeing. A changed economic system could both benefit the environment and address deep inequality in society.

Alongside all of this, the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to become clear, but we know that almost everything has been impacted. As the pandemic has placed a huge mental, physical and financial burden on communities and nations, as well as on the finances of Quakers in Britain, it has also changed how we live and interact with each other, how we work and communicate, how we move around and travel. It threatens livelihoods and social progress, but there may also be opportunities to do things differently, which then places an urgency on all of our work for positive change.

## 3. How we work

### 3.1 Our Quaker experience

Quakers see peace as more than opposition to war and physical violence. It is a comprehensive approach to living in the world, which includes handling conflict in nonviolent ways and ensuring we avoid ways of living which damage the earth, and which might sow the seeds for future violence. We believe that violence and the injustices that often give rise to it are not inevitable but the consequences of human decisions and structures. This also means that human actions can change the world for the better.

This then leads us to work for a 'just peace', a peaceful world which is underpinned by principles of equality and justice. This means working for an end to oppression and discrimination, and doing work that prioritises

both structural (rules and cultures) and personal (hearts and minds) changes. Many of the ends we work towards, historically and currently, are long term and require patient, but creative, work over years or decades.

Our spiritual obligation to truth and integrity leads us to speak out in the world, but we also listen for the insights of others and recognise that we may be mistaken. And our understanding that there is 'that of God in everyone', leads us to take action in ways consistent with the ends we seek – without harm and with respect for all, including those with opposing views. This may involve learning to change ourselves too.

## 4. Principles

The work of QPSW is based on five key principles, which should be a feature of all our work:

### 4.1 Nonviolence

We recognise the physical and psychological damage perpetrated by violence of all kinds, from interpersonal to structural. We are convinced that violence generates violence and that nonviolent action is the only way to make changes that are just and long-lasting. Therefore, we pursue change in an exclusively nonviolent way.

### 4.2 Collaboration

We cannot create the change we want to see by ourselves. Therefore, we want to work with other groups and individuals, and to learn from them. We hope our goals will be shared, but do not demand complete agreement before we work with others, or have it as a necessary endpoint. We want to be imaginative and generous when thinking about potential partnerships. We want to assist Quaker communities and meetings in their work to call for change and to respond to the injustice and suffering they see in their communities. We want to support those who are marginalised to act for change.

### 4.3 Justice and equity

We need to act in ways that promote fairness and the right sharing of world resources. This is especially true in Britain, a country that has historically and currently taken more than its fair share. Injustice and the resentment it breeds carry the potential for war; we are committed to radical but peaceful change of unjust situations and structures. We recognise that colonial legacies, including racism, run deep within our society and seek to transform the longstanding structural injustices that harm so many today. We are committed to raising awareness in BYM that our own organisation contains aspects of structural injustice, and

actively working to rectify these. To do this, we need to hear uncomfortable truths shared by marginalised groups so that good intentions lead to deep change and true transformation.

### 4.4 Working where welcomed

We acknowledge the historic and current privileges held by Quakers in Britain and the reinforcement of power imbalances if we intervene in others' struggles for justice without mandate or invitation, however well-meaning. This is especially important in international settings where our programmes must only operate where welcomed and where the contribution we make cannot be better provided locally.

### 4.5 Faith-led

The entire QPSW framework is underpinned by our faith, which guides our lives and work, infusing what we do and how we do it. This is what we call spirit-led:

- We make major decisions about our work through a process of reflection and discernment
- We may undertake commitments that are not conventionally popular
- We start from a place of principle, seeking to build relationships of reciprocal respect
- We aim to see through privilege, prejudice and partiality to find our capacity for compassion towards everyone, and help others do the same
- We recognise there is often also a need to speak truth to power with love and to stand with those who are oppressed and whose voices are not heard by those in power
- We seek to remain flexible and open to the leadings of the Spirit.



## 5. Our approach to change

The problems in the world are interwoven and complex. We seek to highlight these connections when we speak out and act for change. The climate crisis, poverty, oppression, migration and violent conflict are deeply connected. Our current economic system, and the historical injustices it is based on, affect and exacerbate them all. The changes that are needed to tackle the climate crisis bring opportunities to restructure our economy, our relationships, our lives and our work to create more peaceful, equal and loving relationships and communities, rather than dividing people and exploiting the planet further.

We are learning that change is better, and deeper, when it draws on diverse voices, and includes those with lived experience of the injustices we want to end. We need to include and prioritise those voices in planning our work, and in our governance structures.

We recognise that there are many ways of bringing about social change, and we work knowing that there is no single solution. We don't have all the answers. Key to Quaker approaches to change is being a spiritual, nurturing community in which we accompany and support others to grow and develop, and in which we grow and develop ourselves. We are impelled to move forward in faith, expecting to learn and develop as we go: we need to remain agile, able to adapt our work and approach to changing circumstances.

Underlying all our work is an attempt to build a divine commonwealth, where peace, equality and truth flourish. Our long-term commitment and focus on building relationships, including with unlikely partners, helps us to listen and learn and to build on collective experience. Though we must act with urgency, we are in it for the long haul, and we will find ways to experience joy and to enhance human capacity for love and connection along the way.

Our work for peace over many years and our analysis of the current context leads us to prioritise these approaches:

### 5.1 Community-led peacebuilding

#### *What:*

We support local, community-led peacebuilding, in Britain and internationally. We accompany Quaker and other peacebuilders with training and other forms of support, by providing a physical protective presence to vulnerable communities living under conflict, through conciliation and quiet assistance in peace processes, and in our prayerful solidarity.

We have seen that slow, long-term support and accompaniment can build trust and new relationships in communities, which then serve as a strong foundation for further peace work.

#### *Why:*

Political and economic systems tend to serve the interests of the most powerful, at least until societal pressure reaches a tipping point, so we see communities with a strong political voice as a key driver of peaceful change. In accompanying communities striving for peace and justice, we are able to witness and learn from their successes, improving people's lives at a local level, supporting their having a say in matters that affect them, and serving as a model for other communities to replicate. In sharing this learning between different strands of Quaker work, we can increase our own understanding of the issues facing the world, their interlinked nature and how we can best respond.

#### *When:*

As this work is about supporting others, we do this work only when our involvement is wanted by at least some within the relevant communities, and only where we can add value to locally-led efforts.

### 5.2 Political and institutional change

#### *What:*

Quakers have long experience of engaging lovingly and truthfully with power. We advocate, research and campaign for policy change in Britain and internationally, looking to engage with all those involved in political and economic decision-making, not only elected politicians. We may speak publicly, and we may use quiet diplomacy to privately

bring together those who would not or could not otherwise meet. Where appropriate, we work differently in Britain's nations and regions, taking the lead from those with knowledge of each political system.

Beyond this, we work to change the attitudes of those in power, not only the policies they implement, because this leads to longer-term, more profound change. We seek to bring out the humanity in all those involved in public life, and recognise that even those in power can be damaged by the systems they run.

*Why:*

We see structural and political change as necessary to bring about the world we seek to build, and we believe a Quaker voice on key policy issues, especially when we can speak from experience, can help make compelling arguments for change.

*When:* We prioritise speaking out on issues where there are clear Quaker positions, where there is opportunity for change, or where we can bring new perspectives to the debate.

### 5.3 Partnership and movement-building

*What:*

We work alongside many partners and other Quaker bodies, in Britain and internationally. This includes joint projects or practical work, producing shared public statements and advocacy, and helping to strengthen wider networks and campaigns. We also support action by and with local Quaker communities seeking to bring about positive change.

*Why:*

We recognise that change will not come from our efforts alone. By working in partnership, and convening networks of organisations, we have more impact and can improve by learning from each other. The broad range of issues that Quakers work on enable us to

build connections between diverse movements.

Movements for social change can help to unsettle oppressive power relationships and build new ones, propose new ideas and experiment with new ways of living and organising. However, these are often fragile when not accompanied by the hard work of changing hearts and minds and tackling the barriers, such as poverty and other structural injustices.

*When:*

We expect and seek to work with others unless collaboration would mean compromising on key Quaker positions and principles.

### 5.4 Skills-building and education

*What:*

We train Quakers seeking to put their faith into action; volunteers and activists we work with; and children and teachers as part of our work on peace education. This can include training in any of the other approaches described in this section.

*Why:*

Our work is strengthened when those involved develop the skills, experience and knowledge to bring about effective change. Sharing learning across different pieces of work, and with partners and colleagues in the global South, improves the quality of what we do. For Quakers, learning how to put their faith into action can be part of their spiritual development.

*When:*

We will prioritise training on topics where we have skills and experience to bring, such as nonviolent social change and peace education. We will otherwise provide training when developing a cohort of skilled practitioners is particularly important to achieving a particular goal.

## 6. Our work: how we will respond

We are committed to doing everything we can to achieve the changes we know are needed. Therefore, we are prioritising two interconnected themes over the next five years:

### Peace and peacebuilding:

At a time of heightened division, oppression and violence, and as peace and cooperation efforts are devalued while isolationist and militaristic responses are promoted, we are called to work for a peaceful resolution to all injustices.

To this end we will forge alliances and develop our recognised skills to build peaceful and equitable structures and cultures that are inclusive of everyone.

### Sustainability and climate justice:

In the face of overwhelming evidence of rapidly increasing destruction of the Earth, we are called to work for a world that prioritises ecological repair and well-being.

To this end we will call for and work towards a just solution to the climate crisis; with national and worldwide economies operating within ecological limits and upholding the wellbeing, dignity and equality of all.

(The Quaker commitment to environmental sustainability includes the spiritual basis of our concern for the Earth and its inhabitants, personal actions around greening our lives, and campaigning for wider action on things we cannot do ourselves. Climate justice is the faith in action expression of our sustainability concern.)

Across all our work, we believe that a distinctive contribution we can make is in our methods and approaches, and how we work. Therefore, we want to retain and build our expertise in the methods described in 'Our approach to change'.

We set out below key objectives for these cross-cutting approaches, which will be combined with our thematic priorities in a series of detailed workplans.

### 6.1 Community-led peacebuilding

#### *Objective:*

Equip Quaker and other communities to challenge injustice and to resolve conflict nonviolently. Support and accompany communities in conflict, where we are welcomed.

#### *We will:*

Support Quakers to act as allies, accompaniers and as a protective presence for communities suffering from violence or oppression, both in Britain and parts of the world where we are invited.

Help develop responsive and creative peacebuilding strategies within communities currently suffering from physical or structural violence

Facilitate collaboration and listening between stakeholders, including both those who are marginalised and those with political power.

#### *In the hope that:*

Quaker work is responsive to the needs of communities – especially those with experience of structural violence and injustice

Communities, including Quakers, are able to challenge, inform and inspire those with power and resources to address root causes of violence and injustice

### 6.2 Political and institutional change

#### *Objective:*

Influence currently dominant economic, political and social systems to establish and maintain a more peaceful and sustainable world.

#### *We will:*

Engage with those in power and advocate for social systems, policies and structures that prioritise peaceful and sustainable communities.

Campaign against policies and values detrimental to peace and climate justice, including militarism, dehumanisation of particular groups, or restrictions on civil society.

Speak out nationally and locally from experience, and share the Yearly Meeting's

discerned positions, even when there is no ongoing programme of QPSW work.

*In the hope that:*

Peace, human rights and climate justice become central to economic, political thinking and action throughout society.

Peace education is mainstreamed within the education systems of England, Scotland and Wales.

### 6.3 Partnership and movement building

*Objective:*

Generate wider and more effective participation in work towards a peaceful and sustainable world.

*We will:*

Strengthen a network of Quakers and Quaker organisations, including through our work in Britain and East Africa, to share learning and for collaborative action.

Prioritise network-building in our work with faith groups and civil society.

Engage in and learn from more diverse communities and movements (eg Black Lives Matter, climate emergency campaigns), and contribute nonviolence and conciliation experience to movements where appropriate.

*In the hope that:*

Peace, climate and social justice movements are more joined up, working together constructively and creating new ways to effect social change.

Quakers are supporting and contributing to progressive movements for change, including anti-racism and anti-oppression movements.

Local and national Quaker work is well understood, joined up and mutually supportive.

### 6.4 Skills-building and education

*Objective:*

Enable adults and children, inside and outside the Quaker community, to understand the causes of violence and injustice, and to develop the skills to work nonviolently for peace and climate justice.

*We will:*

Work within the education system to integrate peace education pedagogy and philosophy into the classroom and across whole schools.

Include decolonisation, anti-racism and anti-oppression analysis in all our work.

Equip more Quakers with the tools to analyse, name and challenge present injustices, and their root causes, so that they can be more effective in their witness.

*In the hope that:*

Children and their educators can develop skills and practice in nonviolent dispute resolution, increasing understanding of the root causes of violence and war and champion human rights and justice.

Groups and communities we work with are developing skills, knowledge and confidence in strategic nonviolent social change

Quaker work addresses the negative impact of colonialism and imperialism, in order to more effectively achieve nonviolent social change.

The way we work mirrors the changes we want to see in the world, so that we are far more effective, both as individuals and as an organisation.