

An Introduction to
Quaker Testimonies



American Friends Service Committee



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The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is an inclusive Quaker organization, bringing together people from many traditions to be a prophetic voice and compelling witness for peace.

We understand that peace requires more than the absence of war and violence. Peace requires the presence of justice, access to sustainable livelihoods, and basic human rights for all.

Our mission is to create practical demonstrations of the power of nonviolence to bring about lasting peace, to overcome injustice, and to bring wholeness to communities wounded by violence and oppression.

Our work is based on the testimonies of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), belief in the worth of every person, and faith in the transforming power of love to overcome violence and injustice.

The American Friends Service Committee welcomes staff, volunteers, partners, and committee members from many different cultures, backgrounds, and traditions into our community. Many newcomers to AFSC are drawn to our commitment to peace and social justice but may not be knowledgeable about the foundations of Quaker faith and practice that guide and infuse our work. In this booklet, we seek to distill and share the Quaker testimonies that underlie both what we do and how we aspire to do it.

We are deeply indebted to the San Francisco Friends School, whose inviting and inspiring Introduction to Quaker Testimonies was a model for this booklet. For each testimony, we provide a brief reflection on how it applies to our work at AFSC, relevant quotations from a broad range of traditions, and queries for further reflection. We hope that these pages will draw us together, embracing the power of these eternal values, as we work to bring peace and harmony to the world and to our own lives.

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This booklet is an introduction to Quaker values and their influence on the work of the American Friends Service Committee. In it we explore some of the principal testimonies and practices of the Religious Society of Friends.

Testimonies

Quakers believe in living life in the spirit of love and truth and peace, reaching for the best in oneself and answering “that of God” in everyone. Quaker testimonies are expressions of the commitment to put those beliefs into practice.

The testimonies bear witness to the truth, as Friends in community perceive it—truth known through relationship with God. They do not exist in any rigid, written form; nor are they imposed in any way. Each Quaker searches for how the testimonies can best be expressed in his or her own life.

While attempting to live in concert with these teachings, Quakers are tender with themselves and with each other when they fall short, ready to recommit and try again.

Queries

Quakers use queries for personal reflection, self-examination, or spirited discussion. We have included queries throughout our Introduction to Quaker Testimonies, inviting us to examine the testimonies in light of our own convictions and life experiences.

Peace

Peacemaking at Home and Abroad

Friends oppose and refuse to engage in war and violence. In pursuit of lasting, sustainable peace, they seek to eliminate causes of violent conflict, such as poverty, exploitation, and intolerance.

In renouncing war and violence, Friends embrace the transforming power of love and the power of nonviolence, striving for peace in daily interactions with family, neighbors, fellow community members, and those from every corner of the world.

Friends endeavor to see “that of God” in every person, regardless of nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, or social status.

The AFSC community is called to be a practical expression of the Quaker peace testimony in our individual relations, our local communities, our countries, and our approach to global politics. We oppose violence in all forms. Our work addresses its root causes by forthrightly and nonviolently confronting evil and oppression, whether expressed overtly as physical aggression or covertly as economic injustice. We are called to transform the institutions of society into instruments of peace and to be ourselves transformed.

For us, peace is not just ending war or violence, but nurturing the capacity of individuals, communities, and societies to sustain harmonious relationships based on mutual respect and caring for the welfare of all. We seek to reconcile enemies and serve the needs of all sides torn by violent strife.

Peace comes from being able to contribute the best that we have, and all that we are, toward creating a world that supports everyone.

– HAFSAT ABIOLA, NIGERIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Peace, in the sense of the absence of war, is of little value to someone who is dying of hunger or cold. ... Peace can only last where human rights are respected, where people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free.

– TENZIN GYATSO, 14TH DALAI LAMA

Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.

– OSCAR ROMERO, CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP

If we are serious about peace, then we must work for it as ardently, seriously, continuously, carefully, and bravely as we have ever prepared for war.

– WENDELL BERRY, AUTHOR AND ACTIVIST

Peace in ourselves, peace in the world.

– THICH NHAT HANH, BUDDHIST MONK AND PEACE ACTIVIST



Queries

How can I nurture the seeds of peace within myself, my community, and the world?

How can I work to eliminate hatred, injustice, and both physical and institutional violence?

How can I be more open to seeking the goodness in people who act with violence and hatred?

How can I work to settle disputes within the organization and the community with love and sensitivity for all involved?

How can I increase my understanding of nonviolence and use it in all my interactions?

Equality

Seeking Social Justice

Friends hold that all people are equal in the eyes of God and have equal access to the “inner Light.” This profound sense of equality leads Friends to treat each person with respect, looking for “that of God” in everyone.

This testimony was reflected in the practice of early Quakers, who granted equal spiritual authority to women, refused to use forms of address that recognized social distinctions, supported religious freedom, and worked to abolish slavery.

AFSC supports the development of societies and structures that recognize the dignity of every person. We seek to work with all people in pursuit of justice—the economically impoverished and the materially comfortable, the disenfranchised and the powerful—inviting the Spirit to move among all these groups, making great change possible.

We reject all forms of discrimination, whether based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, immigration status, class, gender, age, ability, or sexual orientation. We work to change the beliefs, practices and institutions that perpetuate prejudice, and we support affected communities in seeking their own liberation and equality. We continually examine our own biases and privileges and strive to achieve greater equality in AFSC, in our communities and in our society.

One has to fight for justice for all. If I do not fight bigotry wherever it is, bigotry is strengthened.

– BAYARD RUSTIN, QUAKER CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.

– JANE ADDAMS, SOCIOLOGIST AND ACTIVIST

I think we have to own the fears that we have of each other, and then, in some practical way, some daily way, figure out how to see people differently than the way we were brought up to.

– ALICE WALKER, AUTHOR

...being worthy of respect does not depend on possessing attractive qualities or skills. Until we can respect another person without justification except that he or she is a child of God, it is not really respect.

– PAUL LACEY, QUAKER EDUCATOR

My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.

– DESMOND TUTU, CHRISTIAN CLERIC AND ACTIVIST



Queries

How do I respond to opportunities to establish personal and professional relationships with people whose backgrounds differ from mine, whether across class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, or ability?

In what ways do I work to change society so that everyone has equal opportunities?

How can I speak up and take action in a loving way when I see and hear injustices?

How do I “speak truth to power” in ways that honor the human dignity of people on all sides of an issue?

Integrity

Consistency in Word and Deed

The need to deal honestly with all others and with oneself has long been a foundational belief among Friends, summarized by the old injunction: “Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay.” For Friends, having integrity means being authentic and having consistency between one’s values and one’s actions. Lack of integrity separates us from our own soul, from the Light within, and from our community.

Quakers try to live according to the deepest truth they know, which they believe comes from God. This means speaking the truth to all, including people in positions of power. Friends do not take oaths when appearing in a court of law, rejecting the idea that there is one standard of truth for daily living and another for the court.

In the AFSC community we are committed to making our words, actions, and beliefs consistent. We “speak truth to power”—and to each other—even when it is difficult and our message may be unpopular. We deal honestly and fairly with colleagues and partners. We take responsibility for our actions and their results. We fulfill our commitments, and we give credit to others for their contributions.

While acting on our deepest beliefs and values, we are also open to new ideas, new solutions, and new paths. We know that our understanding at any moment is incomplete, at best an approximation of the truth that may be improved by new insights.

So let your lives preach, let your light shine...

– GEORGE FOX, FOUNDER OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world.

– PARKER J. PALMER, QUAKER AUTHOR AND EDUCATOR

It is in our lives and not our words that our religion must be read.

– THOMAS JEFFERSON, U.S. PRESIDENT

*Knowing others is to be clever.
Knowing yourself is to be enlightened.
Overcoming others requires force.
Overcoming yourself requires strength.*

– LAO TZU, CHINESE PHILOSOPHER

Wisdom consists in speaking and acting the truth.

– HERACLITUS, GREEK PHILOSOPHER

I have long believed that speaking truth is both the simplest way of leading your life and one of the most difficult to achieve.

– JUDITH AITCHISON, QUAKER AUTHOR



How is my work in harmony with the truth as I understand it?

In what ways do my interactions with other people reflect my beliefs and values?

How can I listen with an open mind to others' experiences?

How can I speak my truth so that those who disagree with me can hear it?

How well do I bring my inner life and outer life into wholeness?

Community

Living in Fellowship

While the Quaker faith is founded on the principle that every person can have a direct relationship with God, an equally central tenet lies in the power of the “gathered community.” When Friends gather in silence to worship, they are collectively seeking the will of God, rather than meditating individually. Shared worship signifies unity and trust.

The Friends community also provides a place for individual members to look for wisdom and support. For example, early Friends relied on their community to provide for the families whose breadwinners were imprisoned for their beliefs—and at Quaker weddings today, the union is not formalized by a clergy member, but is witnessed and endorsed by every member attending.

At AFSC we nurture relationships and partner with communities, believing that, in gathering together, people increase their strength, vision, wisdom, and creativity. We accompany and support communities in their efforts to seek justice and improve their own lives and circumstances. Where people are divided, we strive to build bridges, encourage trust, and create spaces for dialogue and cooperation.

As we engage with the world, we also work to bring our organizational life into harmony with the vision we urge others to achieve. We are committed to building an inclusive AFSC community of staff, Board members, volunteers, and constituents, whose collective experience and wisdom help to guide the organization.

Without community, there is no liberation.

– AUDRE LORDE, POET

One's life has value as long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, and compassion.

– SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, AUTHOR

Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much.

– HELEN KELLER, AUTHOR AND ACTIVIST

From the depth of need and despair, people can work together, can organize themselves to solve their own problems and fill their own needs with dignity and strength.

– CESAR CHAVEZ, FARM WORKER AND LABOR LEADER

Perhaps community is a constellation. Each one of us is a light in the emerging collective brightness. A constellation of light has the greater power of illumination than any single light would have on its own. Together we increase brightness.

– JOHN O'DONOHUE, POET AND AUTHOR



Queries

Do I participate fully in making the AFSC community a welcoming, respectful, and caring place?

In what ways do I honor the diverse gifts, talents, and resources of the individuals and communities with whom I work?

How do I help ensure a safe space for diverse voices and opinions in the communities where I participate and serve?

How can I contribute to AFSC meetings, whether participating in person or by phone, so these gatherings are more constructive and reflective of a truly inclusive community?

Simplicity

Spirit-led Restraint

Friends believe in simple living. This has historically meant simple dress, plain speech, and unadorned meeting houses for worship. Through the simplicity testimony, Friends encourage one another to look beyond the outward and to the inward.

In contemporary terms, Friends try to live lives in which activities and possessions do not get in the way of open and unencumbered communication with others and with one's own spirituality. Clearing away the clutter makes it easier to hear the “still small voice” within.

At AFSC, the commitment to simplicity calls us to speak plainly and go directly to the heart of the matter. However, simplicity does not mean being simplistic. We value nuance and choose words carefully when we speak. We may speak passionately, but we avoid distortion and exaggeration.

In our work, simplicity requires focusing our efforts on what is most important rather than diffusing our energies too broadly. In our personal lives, simplicity may mean limiting our consumerism—and resisting over-commitment, so that we have time to care for ourselves and to be present with one another.

Living simply is the right ordering of our lives and priorities.

– LEONARD KENWORTHY, QUAKER AID WORKER

May we look upon our treasure, the furniture of our houses, and our garments, and try to discover whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions.

– JOHN WOOLMAN, QUAKER AUTHOR

There is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed.

– MOHANDAS K. GANDHI, INDIAN INDEPENDENCE LEADER

The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.

– HANS HOFMANN, PAINTER

Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony. In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.

– ALBERT EINSTEIN, PHYSICIST



Queries

Does the way I spend my time make the best possible contribution to my work?

How might I communicate with more honesty, clarity, and simplicity?

How do I take time to renew myself?

Do I know when to say no to work I cannot adequately attend to?

How can I be more thoughtful about what I need and what I acquire?

Stewardship

Care for the Earth and Its Inhabitants

Friends strive to use God's gifts wisely, with gifts conceived in the broadest of terms. These gifts include our talents and our possessions, as well as our natural environment. Friends believe that such gifts are not ours alone.

To Friends, good stewardship means taking care of what has been given, not just for ourselves, but for the people around us and for future generations as well. Friends strive to use their gifts in accordance with their beliefs.

At AFSC, we strive to use our resources with care to achieve their greatest effect. We spend conservatively, seeking creative and cost-effective pathways and avoiding extravagant expenses.

In the workplace, we are attentive to conserving energy, recycling, and reducing waste. Concern for the ecosystem also leads us to strive to reduce our personal consumption and develop a simple yet adequate lifestyle.

All things are bound together. All things connect. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls also the children of the earth.

– CHIEF OREN LYONS, NATIVE AMERICAN FAITHKEEPER

Everyone needs beauty as well as bread, places to play and pray, where nature heals and gives strength to body and soul alike.

– JOHN MUIR, ENVIRONMENTALIST

We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own—indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder.

– WANGARI MAATHAI, KENYAN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST

Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth. It is the very purpose of life, not something you do in your spare time.

– SHIRLEY CHISHOLM, POLITICIAN AND AUTHOR

A community can use all the skills of its people.

– MAORI PROVERB



Queries

How can I better use AFSC's resources wisely, recognizing that these resources were given freely by others to be used in service of peace and justice?

How do I help others—colleagues, program participants, supporters—recognize and use their gifts?

How can I be a better steward of our environment in my consuming and recycling behaviors?



Other Relevant Quaker Practices

Silent Reflection

Friends gather in silence, in a practice centuries old, to clear the way for the “still small voice.” This silent gathering is based on the belief that if one opens one’s heart and listens, one can hear what is right, and can live out these inner teachings. When a group settles into silence, it feels like more than a simple quieting down; the sense of collective thought deepens.

At AFSC, silence is often used to settle into a meeting, to invite reflection, or to allow time for the synthesis of ideas. Silence refreshes the spirit and makes way for deep thinking about both ethical and intellectual quandaries. It is a habit of mind that the AFSC community cherishes and nurtures.

True silence is ... to the Spirit what sleep is to the body: nourishment and refreshment.

– WILLIAM PENN, QUAKER FOUNDER OF PENNSYLVANIA

Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation.

– JALAL AD-DIN RUMI, MUSLIM POET

Quaker Decision-making

Quaker decision-making is grounded in the belief that when several people come together to labor in the Spirit they can discern a truth that exceeds the reach of any one individual. In making decisions Friends do not simply vote to determine the majority view, but rather they seek unity about the wisest course of action. Over time Friends have developed ways to conduct meetings that nurture and support this corporate discernment process.

To be effective, Quaker process requires that everyone come ready to participate fully by sharing their experiences and knowledge, by listening respectfully to the experiences and knowledge brought by others, and by remaining open to new insights and ideas. This powerful combination of grounded experience and spiritual openness, rationality and faith, allows a deeper truth to emerge. When everyone present is able to recognize the same truth, the meeting has reached unity. The clerk's job is to sense emerging truth and labor with those present to put that truth into words.

At AFSC, the Board and Executive Committees make decisions in a worshipful spirit using Quaker process. Many other AFSC committees and staff meetings also use elements of Quaker process and expect that participants will:

- enter the process with an open mind and avoid holding unshakably to a predetermined position;
- commit to looking for creative solutions, not just a least common denominator or compromise; and
- engage in the process, ready to speak their minds and to listen for wisdom, truth, or the most compelling proposal, which may come from anyone present.

In a Friends meeting, Quaker process is used in the Meeting for Business as well as by various committees. However, many day-to-day decisions are made by individuals carrying out the responsibilities of their positions—for example, the treasurer or the clerk of the committee charged with maintaining the meeting house.

Similarly, at AFSC many decisions are made by staff members exercising the duties that they were hired to fulfill. Such day-to-day decisions are made within boundaries established by organizational policies. In all decision-making, AFSC encourages transparency, consultation with those most affected and a willingness to learn and adjust based on experience.

Nonviolent Witness and Action

While renouncing violence, Quakers have, from their earliest days, found ways to nonviolently resist war, slavery, religious intolerance, harsh penal methods, and other injustices. For their beliefs, they were willing to suffer imprisonment and even death. Friends have understood—with Gandhi, King, Chavez, and other leaders of non-violent movements—that pacifism at its best is anything but passive.

AFSC, as a Quaker organization, applies the principles of nonviolence in both our internal and external dealings. In our engagement with the world, we not only speak out to condemn injustice, but when necessary engage in direct nonviolent action or even civil disobedience to bring about justice and sustainable peace in the world.

Within the organization, we work to eliminate violence and injustice from our systems and working relationships by treating each other with respect, acting with integrity, and resolving differences through the intentional practice of non-violent methods.



I have no idea of submitting tamely to injustice inflicted either on me or on the slave. I will oppose it with all the moral powers with which I am endowed. I am no advocate of passivity.

– LUCRETIA MOTT, QUAKER ABOLITIONIST AND ACTIVIST

Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time; the need for mankind to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence.

– MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER

In place of weapons of violence, you have to use your mind, your heart, your sense of humor, every faculty available to you.

– JOAN BAEZ, MUSICIAN AND PEACE ACTIVIST



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For those interested in further exploration of Quakerism and Quaker values, we suggest visiting the online Quaker Information Center at www.quakerinfo.org.

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