



# A Quaker view on...

**peace,  
conflict &  
violence**

**human  
rights**

**crime &  
punishment**

**racial & religious  
prejudice**

**the  
environment**

# A Quaker view on...

Members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) try to put their faith into practice. Our inner experience leads us to a commitment to equality, peace, simplicity and truth, which we try to live out in our lives. This is often referred to as Quaker testimony and underpins a lot of Quaker thinking and work.

There are no declared creeds or statements that you have to believe to be a Quaker. Our understanding of faith is that true fulfilment comes from attempting to live life in the spirit of love, truth and peace, and by seeking and acknowledging that of God in everyone. The concept of 'that of God in everyone', by which each human being is considered both unique and precious, is a key tenet of Quaker belief. Interpreting what or who God is, and how God manifests in individuals, is for personal discernment.

This does not make Quakers unrealistic. We know and feel the often unjust and painful world we live in. But in our worship we are led to recognise and foster in our hearts a vision of a world of justice, peace and equality. We strive to let our lives speak to these and try to build that world in the ways we live and act.

# Peace, conflict & violence

## Quakers believe...

A commitment to peace lies at the heart of Quaker faith and practice. It is part of our striving to live faithfully and is one of our testimonies to the world. Quakers believe that conflict can be a positive force for change, if handled creatively, but it is the use of violence, or the threat of violence, as a means of dealing with conflict, that is problematic.

Quakers think of peace as an approach to living in the world and working for social change, rather than simply an ideological opposition to war and to violence. The use of violence to bring change may create temporary good, but also increases the chance of violence becoming a permanent way of resolving conflict.

Peace is not simply the absence of direct violence, such as murder or domestic violence. Structural violence and cultural violence must also be dealt with for true peace to be present.

Structural violence is present when poverty and hunger are prevalent alongside great wealth. United Nations statistics on the Millennium Development Goals for 2007 show that the seven richest people in the world have a total wealth greater than the combined GDP (gross domestic product) of the world's 41 poorest countries. Cultural violence is present in a society when a dominant culture asserts its position and symbols to the detriment of others, e.g. attacking or otherwise disrespecting the symbols of their identity, language, dress or forms of worship.

For Quakers, such situations represent an unjust and violent world system.

We consider suffering, as a result of both direct and structural violence, to be an avoidable tragedy. When governments and citizens devote significant resources to tackling the root causes of conflict and injustice, the use of violence as a force for change can be greatly reduced and possibly even eliminated.

## **Faith into action**

We strive to practice peace in our own lives, both as individuals and as a community. A key element for Quakers is that we seek to live what we believe. Our work on peace is rooted in the Quaker testimony to peace and to equality.

Corporately, Quakers in Britain have always opposed the use of violence in any form, for any end. Instead, we work to build the conditions of peace that 'take away the occasion of all wars'. Therefore, a central part of the work of Quakers is to respond to human need in the belief that if the problems of poverty and injustice are not attended to, there will not be peace.

In our relationship with others, be they friends, family or strangers, we aim to recognise the dignity of the other alongside our own. This means working to manage conflict with others without seeking their destruction or subjugation.

We also consider the impact of our actions and life choices on the world, for example considering both how we make and how we spend and invest money.

## **Past**

Quakers are probably best known for their stand against war as conscientious objectors. In times of war, Quakers have refused to take up arms and instead tried to help the victims

on all sides of the conflict. During past wars, Quakers have participated in war relief work, with many Quakers joining the Friends Ambulance Unit. Quakers have also been involved in humanitarian work in parts of the world where there is violent conflict. In recognition of this work, Quakers were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947.

## Present

Quakers work together as a community, at local, national and international level. Locally we work to introduce peace education, conflict resolution skills and peer-mediation to schools. We organise peace vigils and Nonviolent Direct Action, as well as promoting and supporting the understanding and use of active nonviolence. Information on these can be found at [www.quaker.org.uk/peaceexchange](http://www.quaker.org.uk/peaceexchange) and [www.turning-the-tide.org](http://www.turning-the-tide.org)

Quakers support and provide training for groups that are working creatively to build a more peaceful world by challenging injustice and overcoming oppression. Quaker meeting houses are used as community resources, hosting public events to raise awareness of current issues that challenge a peaceful society.

Friends have been involved internationally in highly delicate and sensitive negotiations and mediation, and have worked to support local peacemaking initiatives across the world. Quakers were also involved in developing the Alternatives to Violence Project training, created to assist prisoners in handling personal anger.

Many Quakers join in nonviolent protests against weapons, particularly nuclear weapons. Quakers work for disarmament and against the arms trade, sharing the belief that the more weapons there are in a society, the more likelihood there is of war. Many Quakers believe that war is also made more likely if the military have a strong influence on governmental policies.

# Human rights

## Quakers believe...

Quakers recognise the equal worth and unique nature of every person. A Quaker statement in 1991 said, “Our concern for human rights arises from our understanding of how God works in the world and our understanding of God’s will for humankind. We believe that all human life has a sacred bond with God and that all people have a holy duty to live the will of God. To develop and grow into the persons God would have us be requires a social environment which provides security and protection for life and personal liberty.”

## Faith into action

For many Quakers, a core principle is to try and live what we believe. Our work on human rights is rooted in the Quaker testimony to equality and to peace. These values underpin much of Quaker work.

## Past

Quakers were instrumental in setting up Amnesty International. Using his contacts, experience and position, Quaker Eric Baker campaigned for the humane treatment of political prisoners. He wrote an article for *The Observer* entitled “The Forgotten Prisoner” in 1961. This article called for “the amnesty of all political prisoners” and began a campaign that resulted in the founding of Amnesty International in 1962. Many Friends continue to be involved with Amnesty International, both as members and as volunteers.

By meeting with MPs, Quakers worked for the introduction of a Private Members’ Bill to raise the age of recruitment into the armed forces to 18 years old. This bill was then used to press the UK government to ratify the optional protocol on the rights of the child in relation to armed conflict.

## Present

The work of Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW), the department which works on behalf of Friends in Britain to translate faith into action, and Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), based in Geneva and New York, is focused at a variety of levels – from grassroots to global – on supporting the promotion and protection of human rights.

Human rights protection has been a core aspect of the work of QUNO since its inception in the 1920s. Current work focuses on: women in prison and children of imprisoned mothers; child soldiers; refugees and conscientious objectors.

QPSW programmes in Palestine and Israel, and in the post-Yugoslav countries, work on monitoring, reporting and opposing violations of human rights and international law. Ecumenical accompaniers, trained and supported by QPSW, travel to Israel–Palestine to provide a peaceful and supportive presence to both Israeli peace groups and Palestinian communities. They offer protection through nonviolent presence, advocacy and human rights monitoring.

Our *Statement on Torture* states that “British Quakers are deeply concerned at the continued existence of torture and at recent attempts to justify it, in the context of the ‘war on terror’, by countries that would previously have condemned it.” Quaker Concern for the Abolition of Torture works to raise awareness and campaigns to end the use of torture.

In Britain, Quakers raise issues relating to the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers with their MPs. This includes highlighting how changes to legislation, and the rhetoric used in Parliament when debating these changes, impact upon refugees’ day-to-day lives. We believe that we have a duty to challenge some of the bills that are brought before Parliament and pursue dialogue with MPs. Quakers have a long tradition of working in this way, which we call ‘speaking truth to power’.

# Crime & punishment

## Quakers believe...

Our Quaker belief that there is that of God in everyone prompts us to see criminals as human beings with dignity and rights and to care for their welfare regardless of their crime. We believe no one is outside of God's love and that both justice and forgiveness are needed in dealing effectively with crime. In a world of increasing violence, we still believe in the Christian principle of overcoming evil with good.

This perspective has led Quakers to be at the forefront of penal reform, emphasising the need for rehabilitation rather than retribution in the criminal justice system. We believe that by working towards rehabilitation it is possible to heal not only those directly affected by the crime/offence but also to have a positive impact on the community.

Quakers oppose capital punishment. Our *Statement on the Death Penalty* states that "private vengeance or judicial execution serves no purpose but to perpetuate... the trauma. Killing... as a judicial act, brutalises a society that kills."

## Faith into action

Putting their faith into practice, many Quakers work to support people in prison and their families, and are involved in working for change in the criminal justice system.

Too often, the needs of the victim tend to be ignored and the offender is punished without reference to the victim. Equally, no redress is made to right the wrong committed.

Quakers feel that "punishment is useful only when it helps people to realise the hurt they are doing to [the] sense of worth in themselves and others."



## Past

Quaker George Fox was imprisoned under the Quaker Act of 1662, which made holding and attending Quaker meetings illegal. Following this experience, Fox identified the “corrupting influence of prison life”, whereby prisoners learn about a life of crime from other prisoners.

Another Quaker, Elizabeth Fry, is well known for her work on prison reform during the early 19th century, especially with imprisoned women and children, as depicted on the back of a five-pound note. As well as setting up a school for the children of prisoners, Fry also campaigned against capital punishment and against the deportation of prisoners to Australia.

## Present

Quaker prison ministers work as part of multifaith chaplaincy teams to offer spiritual support and friendship to prisoners.

The Quaker Crime, Community & Justice Group is involved in supporting and working for restorative justice in the criminal justice system. Restorative justice is based on dialogue and negotiation, rather than the adversarial process of the criminal justice system. It respects the basic human needs of the victim, the offender and the community, and is based on the principle that victims desire recognition of the harm done. Restorative justice requires the offender to take responsibility for their crime and to make amends to the victim and the community.

Quakers also work to introduce the principles of restorative justice to schools, in the form of peer-mediation, conflict resolution and restorative conferencing. This work is aimed at prevention as well as resolution. The language used doesn't refer to victim and offender, but rather acknowledges that conflict can be more complicated and that no one is completely blameless or wholly responsible for the harm caused.

# Racial & religious prejudice

## Quakers believe...

Endeavouring to see that of God in everyone translates into a testimony to equality. We believe that our common humanity transcends our differences and leads us to work for a society where difference is respected and celebrated. We do not believe it is reasonable to expect assimilation or to ignore difference by claiming to treat everyone the same, as this denies the value of variety.

Quakers understand that prejudice can be caused by ignorance and fear. We work to teach tolerance and understanding so that all forms of prejudice are recognised and challenged.

We believe that a community which values the good in everyone and respects the diversity of faiths is essential for a peaceful and just society, where everyone can live without hostility. We assert that achieving such a society requires a long-term commitment by everyone, through the building of good relationships.

## Faith into action

The Society of Friends was founded in Britain, by George Fox, during the turbulent mid 17th century. Quakers were seen as subversive and faced discrimination, ridicule and hostility and were imprisoned and persecuted for their beliefs. They published a peace testimony, knowing that there can be no peace without justice and equality for all.

Our experiences have reinforced our belief in the importance of religious freedom, the freedom to worship without state interference and the freedom to form and express one's own

beliefs. We consider hastily crafted legislation and short-term measures devised to prevent extremism to be not only unhelpful but also counterproductive. Such legislation frequently risks alienating and radicalising those we need to reach out to.

## Past

The problems of racism and religious discrimination are not new. Quakers have been involved with demands for reforms and justice over the past 280 years. For Quakers, the subject was first discussed with regard to slavery in 1727. London Yearly Meeting (Quakers in Britain) stated:

*It is the sense of this meeting, that the importing of negroes from their native country and relations by Friends, is not a commendable nor allowed practice, and is therefore censured by this meeting.*

In the years that followed, Quakers were instrumental in ending the slave trade in Britain.

Quakers also recognised that “the roots of racial prejudice lie deep within us, and in seeking a solution to the evil results of racial tensions we need to search our own hearts.” (Yearly Meeting, 1952).

In 1988 Meeting for Sufferings, a nationwide Quaker committee, made a *Statement of Intent on Racism*. In this they stated:

*...there is incontrovertible evidence that people who belong to ethnic minority groups... are subject to a variety of disadvantages. In addition to discrimination... our fellow citizens are often subjected to abuse, harassment and violence. The Religious Society of Friends has a duty to play its part in ending these abuses.*

In 1992 they set up a working group to explore racism in the Quaker Society in Britain – Britain Yearly Meeting. *Searching our own hearts*, a video and study guide, was produced in 1997 for use by meetings to provoke discussion and deepen awareness among Friends.

Some Quakers regularly played a part in local initiatives such as a series of multifaith public vigils and the nonviolent escorting of people going to vote in an East London local government by-election.

## Present

Quakers continue working to create and maintain a society which lives at peace, promotes harmony, values difference and nurtures each individual.

We are aware that global migration brings with it major challenges, which are not likely to ease in the near future. Many who arrive in Britain face uncertainty, isolation, separation from family, loss of familiar ways of living and, frequently, poverty.

Quakers wish to embrace the diversity that immigration brings and see it as a gift, not a problem. We wish to support the receiving communities, often themselves under strain, and to encourage local Quakers to welcome and nurture those who arrive here, to meet that of God in them and to enable them to live fulfilling lives.

In March 2008, Northern Friends Peace Board held a conference on 'Building Peace – Tackling Racism'. Although academic in focus, a study guide with DVD is planned, looking at more practical skills such as responding to casual racism at work and the need to tackle racism nonviolently. To find out more, visit the website: <http://nfpb.gn.apc.org>

# The environment

## Quakers believe...

*We do not own the world, and its riches are not ours to dispose of at will. Show a loving consideration for all creatures and seek to maintain the beauty and variety of the world. Work to ensure that our increasing power over nature is used responsibly, with reverence for life.*

*Advice & Queries: 42*

Compassion and a sense of that of God in the other point to a path of nonviolence towards other people, other species and the earth. We seek to understand and reduce the real and potential harm caused by our lives and actions. This means moving to a way of life that does not cause ecological damage or depend on violence to secure resources.

## Faith into action

Simplicity is a component of the Quaker testimonies, and is connected to sufficiency: knowing how much is enough. Quakers try to live simply, by resisting the urge to buy what we do not need and by avoiding the clatter of fashion and consumerism, and by focusing on what matters. This means keeping ourselves informed of the effect our lifestyle has on the environment and the global economy, as well as reminding ourselves that we do not need very much in material terms.

## Past

Quaker witness to sustainability and the environment has deep roots. During the 17th century, Friends wrote of their concern for the human relationship with the earth and all its inhabitants.

In the 18th century, John Woolman wore undyed clothes, partly because of his concern for the environmental damage caused by the dyeing process.

He expressed his concern for the soil and animal husbandry of the time, noting that:

*...landlords... by too much tilling, so robbed the earth of its natural fatness that the produce thereof hath grown light.*

John Woolman was also conscious of the duty that one generation had to the next, in how they cared for the natural resources of the earth. He noted in early writings that:

*The produce of the earth is a gift from our gracious creator to the inhabitants and to impoverish the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age.*

Since the 1920s, British Friends have produced many minutes and epistles of their annual meeting, highlighting the urgent need for action to halt ecological decline and declaring a sense of unity with all creation.

This is a rapidly developing area of Quaker testimony and one which prompts us to question assumptions we have always taken for granted; the needs of the earth can sometimes seem at odds with our own needs.

## **Present**

Many Quakers are making individual decisions regarding the impact of their own lifestyles on the environment. Several Quaker meetings have run 'EcoTeams' sessions, looking at issues such as household waste, recycling, energy and water

use, and travel. They found that participating Quakers had waste production levels of approximately one quarter of the UK average.

The Living Witness Project aims to support the development of Quaker corporate witness to sustainable living, and explore ways of taking it to the wider community in Britain and elsewhere, via a growing and vibrant network of Quaker meetings. The project explores corporate witness through study groups and practical activities. They produce resources for individuals and meetings. More information can be found on their website: [www.livingwitness.org.uk](http://www.livingwitness.org.uk)

QPSW has done some exploratory work on the concept of human security: examining the links between environmental degradation, economic injustice and violent conflict. We believe that human security differs from the prevailing global security model in that it puts safeguarding people, rather than territory, at the centre of security concerns.

QPSW also carries out research on the ethical policies and practices of multinational corporations, on behalf of their partner organisation, the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility. An example of this is the recently published report *Water Sustainability: Meeting the Challenge*, a comparative analysis of water consumption in the food processing and beverage industries. Information on this and other such projects can be found on the website: [www.eccr.org.uk](http://www.eccr.org.uk)

## Want to know more?

Quakers are formally known as the Religious Society of Friends and hence often refer to each other as 'Friends'. The public more commonly refer to them as Quakers.

The information in this booklet refers specifically to the beliefs of Quakers in Britain and the work done by and on behalf of them. Quakers around the world vary in how they worship and in their theology, though the testimonies are lived out in the lives of Quakers everywhere.

To find out more about the centrally managed work of Quakers in Britain, check out our website: [www.quaker.org.uk](http://www.quaker.org.uk)

For information on our work for peace and justice check out: [www.quaker.org.uk/qpsw](http://www.quaker.org.uk/qpsw)

For information on Quakers as a religious and spiritual movement have a look at: [www.quaker.org.uk/different](http://www.quaker.org.uk/different)

This booklet has been written specifically for use by secondary schools and pupils, but will be of interest to anyone wanting to know more about how Quakers translate faith into practice.

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