

Testimonies

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Among the distinctive Quaker principles are those known as the testimonies. These are values that Friends hold corporately, and which are reflected in our witness to the world.

The testimonies express our communal experience of the Light Within and our commitment to its fruits. We show this commitment in our outward lives: in our dedication to living peacefully, for example, and in our love for each other in “that which is eternal.” Living out the testimonies in thought and action reflects the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Be faithful in those testimonies of life and light, against all those things that have come up in this night of apostasy from the light, life and power of God.

George Fox, 1675

The testimonies are not a set of distinct tenets, such as those that might be found in a creedal religion. Still, for the sake of clarity, modern Friends often list the testimonies under separate categories such as “simplicity” and “equality.” In order to emphasize the unity of the testimonies, the testimony of integrity (“wholeness”) is often the first one cited, as wholeness characterizes the testimonies taken together.

Integrity

Perhaps the most fundamental testimony of Friends is that of integrity. This testimony calls us to a way of life aligned with the will of God as revealed by the Light Within us, reflecting our devotion to truth, honesty, authenticity, and wholeness. We endeavor to become whole within ourselves, and to make our actions reflect our words and beliefs. We strive to hold to a single standard of truth, saying what we mean and doing what we say.

Let your ‘yea’ be yea and your ‘nay’ be nay; anything more than this comes from evil.

The Gospel According to Matthew 5:37

The commitment of Friends to a single standard of truth has many practical implications. For example, Quakers do not swear to tell the truth in a court of law when instructed to do so, because we believe that swearing to tell the truth implies that we might otherwise lie or distort the truth. We invest our money on the basis of Quaker principles, rather than entrusting it to organizations that offer a higher rate of return but do not act in accordance with Friends’ beliefs. Actions such as these might not be comfortable for us, but Friends hold integrity to be of a higher value than comfort.

The Inner Light does not lead men to do what is right in their own eyes, but that which is right in God’s eyes.

Ellen S. Bosanquet, 1927

Peace

Friends are widely known for our efforts to bring about a more peaceful world. We shun violence in word and deed, holding that war is inconsistent with God’s will. Early Friends steadfastly refused to participate in wars, preferring imprisonment and persecution to harming other children of God.

We...utterly deny...all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretense whatsoever. This is our testimony to the whole world....[T]he Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ nor for the Kingdoms of this world.

Friends' Declaration to Charles II, 1660

In recent times, Friends who have refused to fight have often requested to serve in some humanitarian way, and many have done so. Illinois Yearly Meeting stands in support of Friends who engage in conscientious objection, war tax resistance, relief and reconciliation work, and similar efforts to promote peace and justice.

Mindful of the presence of evil in the world, Friends attempt to counter it by using nonviolent means of preventing harm to others while bearing in mind that the perpetrators are also children of God. We have ministered to those on all sides of any conflict, in accordance with our belief that God "sends rain on the just and on the unjust," as Jesus states in *The Gospel According to Matthew* (5:45).

The Quaker peace testimony is not simply a denunciation of outward violence, but also an affirmation of the power of inner peace. As Quaker founder George Fox wrote about his response to those who offered him a military commission, "I told them that I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars." Fox understood that once we achieve peace inwardly, participation in war and violence becomes impossible. The closer we come to achieving the inward condition that God wants for us, the better able we are to cultivate peace in our family, our workplace, our community, and the world.

Simplicity

The Quaker testimony of simplicity denotes an inward centeredness that is responsive to the Divine. As we become centered, we are drawn away from the complexity and clutteredness of secular life and led toward the purity and simplicity of truth to which Friends aspire.

Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center – a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It takes no time but occupies all our time.

Thomas Kelly, 1941

Friends do not have a set procedure for reflecting inward simplicity, but we have found that outward adornments can be impediments to achieving and maintaining it. Early Friends believed that wearing unadorned plain dress helped free them from vanity. Few contemporary Quakers wear traditional plain dress, but we continue to believe that some measure of detachment from material possessions and worldly aspirations helps us attend to the Light.

The increase of business became my burden, for though my natural inclination was toward merchandise, yet I believed Truth required me to live more free from outward cumbers and there was now a strife in my mind between the two; and in this exercise my prayers were put up to the Lord, who graciously heard me and gave me a heart resigned to his holy will.

John Woolman, 1774

Friends regard church rituals and material trappings as having the potential to hinder our attention to God's word. We gather in unadorned meeting houses and wait in holy silence for the Divine Spirit to guide our worship.

Equality

The testimony of equality is based on Friends' belief that there is that of God in everyone. We regard outward differences between people as less significant than the spiritual equality of all human beings. Quakers have always regarded men and women as equally worthy in God's eyes.

The power and spirit of God gives liberty to all, for women are heirs of life as well as men.

George Fox, 1676

Early Quakers refused to address their "superiors" by honorifics or titles, nor would they bow or doff their hats to them. These countercultural practices, which resulted in the persecution of our 17th-century forebears, have informed our tradition ever since that time. Quakers accepted and upheld the equality of people of different races, classes, and sexual orientations earlier than most of the rest of society, and have worked toward economic equality and social justice. In our meetings we strive to create an inclusive environment, one in which all of those attending feel fully welcome.

The testimony of equality does not imply that everyone has the same talents, but rather that each of us is equally a child of God, blessed with gifts that are different from and complementary to those of other people. When we unite as a meeting community, our diverse gifts unite to serve that community.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians 12:4-6

Community

The testimony of community is central to Friends' practices. We worship together in order to be receptive and responsive to God's Light, and we minister to all members of our meeting community.

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations against another; but praying for one another and helping one another up with a tender hand.

Isaac Pennington, 1667

Friends' orientation toward community stands in contrast to the individualism that characterizes our contemporary secular world. We interpret Jesus' injunction to love one another as calling us to share concerns and practices with each other. Our collective attention to God's word, undertaken corporately in Meeting for Worship, serves as the foundation of the faith community to which Friends aspire.

As Quakers, we believe that we are called to be responsible and accountable to each other. We respond to the needs of our meeting community in many ways. These include pastoral care and the formation of clearness committees, in which an individual Friend is held in the Light by fellow worshippers who seek God's will for that Friend.

A Quaker community offers loving support, guidance, comfort, and inspiration to all of those who become a part of it. It also serves as a foundation for our witness to other communities of which we are also a part.

We are an imperfect human community, growing into a more perfect relationship with God.

Lloyd Lee Wilson, 1993

Stewardship

Quakers consider all possessions and resources to be gifts that God has entrusted to our loving care. As individuals and as a community, we are called to selflessly consider whether our lifestyles and daily practices are consistent with this understanding.

O that we who declare against wars and acknowledge our trust to be in God only, may walk in the Light and thereby examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates! May we look upon our treasures, and the furniture of our houses, and the garments in which we array ourselves, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in our possessions...

John Woolman, c. 1770
A Plea for the Poor

In prayerfully reflecting on how we obtain and use our possessions and resources, we are likely to discover the seeds, not only of war, but also of oppression, self-indulgence, injustice, and ecological damage. Faithful stewardship consists in sincere efforts to remedy those ills. Each of us is called to consider what changes we can make in our lives, lifestyles, and relationships to better support the earth and all its creatures, and then to make those changes as best we can. Such reflection and transformation can be difficult and even painful, but Friends believe that faithful stewardship is essential to being in right relationship with one another and the Divine.

We are called to live in right relationship with all Creation, recognizing that the entire world is interconnected and is a manifestation of God.

Quaker EarthCare Witness
Vision and Witness Statement

As Friends, we are called to bear the testimonies in our hearts, minds, and actions. This is not a matter of memorizing lists of categories, whether those cited above or any others, but of responding to our experience of the Divine and gaining strength and insight from those who have preceded us in doing so. In learning of the courageous witness of our predecessors over the centuries — those devoted Quakers who have witnessed to that of God in all human beings, spoken truth to power, and honored the earth and all its creatures — we orient ourselves toward more fully reflecting Quaker testimonies in our lives and encouraging others to do likewise.

A “testimony” is a declaration of truth....It is not an ejaculation, a way of letting off steam, or baring one’s soul. It has a purpose, and that is to get other people...to turn to God.

John Punshon, 1987

The testimonies are neither fixed nor unchangeable. In accordance with Friends' belief in "continuing revelation" they evolve, and our understanding of them evolves as well. Many of the issues to which early 21st-century Friends feel called to respond, such as nuclear power and recombinant genetic engineering, are the products of recent technological innovations which did not exist for earlier generations of Friends. In such cases we endeavor to discern God's will concerning whether a new testimony, or perhaps an extension of an old one, is in order.

Friends sustain and deepen their commitment to the testimonies through various means, including prayer, reading devotional literature, and attending to vocal ministry in meeting for worship. Some of us have found it helpful to regularly ask ourselves questions such as "How am I living the testimonies?" and "How am I being faithful?" In attending to the testimonies, we often find that issues that seemed complex or even insoluble are better understood and resolved through devoted attention to the leadings of the Holy Spirit.

The testimonies represent our highest values as Quakers. Learning to live in accordance with them is challenging. We often fall short, but we continue to strive.

I don't regard the testimonies as rules to walk by but ideals to aim for, as guides and reminders of how we should try to live....We have not attained perfection; we are still on our way.

Kathleen Douglas, 2000