

Thousand Islands Monthly Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

TOWARD A CULTURE OF PEACE
A MINUTE CONCERNING OUR TESTIMONY ON PEACE

For over three hundred years Quakers, members of the Religious Society of Friends, have testified and acted for peace. The Peace Testimony has itself sometimes been a source of struggle. Friends (as Quakers more properly refer to each other) have not always been in complete unity about their pacifism. As a consequence of changing circumstances, Friends have wrestled with the Peace Testimony, refined and restated it in each generation. But over all the centuries, the solid core of our witness has been largely unchanged.

Margaret Fell, on behalf of the Friends, first presented the Peace Testimony to King Charles II and his government in 1660.

All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars and strifes, and fighting with outward weapons, for any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world.

Her presentation went on to state the spiritual basis for this uncompromising position. Earlier, and in another context, George Fox spoke to the government (this time in the person of Oliver Cromwell and the Commonwealth Commissioners) saying that he (Fox) "lived by the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars," thus emphasizing that it was not sufficient to be against war, but rather that it was necessary to conduct one's life in a peaceful and just manner.

The Peace Testimony in the 21st Century springs from the same source as in earlier times. That source is the spiritual experience of Quakers in a community of silent worship. Now, as then, we know from religious experience that every person is a child of God and that violence against the children of God is wrong. We are convinced that all persons deserve a place in the sun, and deserve to live their lives free from the destruction and terror of war. We also know in the same way that it is wrong to teach our children to hate their enemies and to kill them on command.

This deeply felt spiritual experience matches the radical teachings on peace to be found in the Christian Gospels and in comparable teachings of other religions. To deny war and preparations for war creates discomfort because it defies the logic of vengeance. Submitting to violence, and caring for the welfare of one's enemies are extreme departures from what the world considers normal. Pacifism also makes us vulnerable because it sets us apart from those who desire war. In the past, and still today, pacifists have suffered and died for their convictions. Many people are yearning for a more peaceful world, but they find it easier to support war than face the consequences of pacifism. The path of peace is not an easy one.

Practical actions flow from these deeply held religious foundations. We assert that right policies can flow only from the most profound ideals. A peace-loving people must first find peace within themselves and treat their neighbours in loving, compassionate ways. Peace begins at home with justice for all. To do this there must be an increase in the skills of non-violent action, skills to negotiate peaceful settlement of disagreements. Many Canadians are well aware of such skills, and are inclined to use them in local and national disputes. The need is even greater internationally where leaders of powerful nations find it in their interests to force their will on others by warfare. The legitimate needs and aspirations of people must have some realization. The price of peace is helping your enemies be happy.

Our situation is much more complex than when Quakers first articulated the Peace Testimony because our economy is now fed by manufacture of arms. It was an easier prospect to beat swords into plowshares than it is to convert battle tanks into farm tractors. There are no peaceful uses to which manufacturing cluster bombs can be put. Conscription of young men for compulsory killing has been replaced by conscription of taxes for compulsory war funding. The lust for power over others and the greed for profit are among the most despicable and pervasive characteristics of corporate and governmental militarism in the 21st Century.

The history of warfare shows that it has never succeeded in bringing peace. Violence feeds upon itself and warfare reproduces itself. War is not an effective instrument of policy. It simply does not work to achieve the goals stated for it. "A war to end wars." "Peace in our time." And "War on terror" are slogans whose emptiness is clear. Modern warfare has extended itself to ravage innocent people, dismissed as "collateral damage," another slogan loaded with irony and contempt for humanity. We reject the causes of war, whether real or imagined, and are outraged at its cost in human lives and damage to the biosphere.

We respect the high ideals of humanitarian service which motivate many men and women who join the armed forces. There is need for well-trained and disciplined groups to serve the common good in relief of suffering caused by disasters at home and abroad. There is also need for such people to stand between warring factions while peace work goes on. This dangerous work, often assigned to the military, is ideally suited to well-equipped, well-trained, unarmed groups supported at public expense. We see a place for such a non-violent peace force as a sound replacement for Canada's military establishment.

Peace must be demonstrated in our homes, in our communities and nation. To do this we must first overcome fear and then practice peace. Spiritual practice and faith-based discernment are the sources of courage which have sustained pacifists throughout the centuries. Once courage is found then we can practice A.J. Muste's advice, "There is no way to peace: peace is the way." We can refuse to be complicit in life styles that destroy the earth's life support system and lead to injustices which promote conflict.

We bear witness to these truths and call on people of good will to create a culture of peace.