

## Worship and Action Update, September 5, 2003

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

Last week's Update offered thoughts of Ruth Kinsey, pastor of Farmington Friends Meeting, about the challenge of the Peace Testimony in 2003 and of embracing those among us who do not disavow all wars. She noted that "we all believe in and want peace," but nonetheless may differ on whether this belief precludes us from supporting a "just war." How we handle such disagreements may better indicate our faithfulness as Friends, as "one of the things Quakers are known for is our willingness to accept people where they are and not demand that someone must believe a certain thing in order to be Quaker." Ruth asked, "Are you able to disagree and still love the other? Are you able to disagree and still encourage the other?"

Three Friends from 15th Street Meeting have looked deeply into these issues. Queries posed earlier by one who asks us to examine the foundation of our commitment to nonviolence appear at the close of this Update. The responses of two to Ruth's message are shared below, and well reflect Ruth's entreaty to disagree and also "encourage one another."

Rich Accetta-Evans offers his perspective on living the Peace Testimony and embracing the rough and tumble of corporate discernment, while preserving Friends' historical essence. He asks us to consider what it is that makes us Friends:

Ruth's central concern was to urge that disagreements in Meetings be handled in an honest and loving manner. This statement is so true, and Friends so much need to hear it, that I want to emphasize it before passing on to other statements of Ruth's with which I -- well -- sharply disagree.

Ruth's message makes the important and useful point that people who may believe in a just war are not for that reason "against peace." However, that should not be understood to imply that there is nothing more to the Peace Testimony than just being "for peace," that the little matter of whether one will fight in or support an actual war is just a detail of how the Peace Testimony is "lived out." If that were true there would be no need for a distinctive Quaker Peace Testimony at all. Lots of other churches and secular people as well are "for peace."

The Quaker Peace Testimony is more than that. It is our testimony to the world (hopefully, more in actions than in words) that in obedience to Christ we are committed to use only love and truth as weapons in the struggle against evil, and that we will never fight or war against flesh and blood using "outward weapons" for any reason whatever. It is quite a commitment.

There have been Friends in every generation at least since the Civil War who found they could not uphold it, and it may be that all Friends, if they are honest with themselves, will find this testimony a challenge to struggle with. For that reason, it is natural that we sometimes have disagreements about it. But a disagreement with the Peace Testimony is a disagreement with the Peace Testimony. One can choose to support the Peace Testimony, or one can choose to support "just wars." But no one can choose both at the same time. If the Peace Testimony is ever abandoned by the Society of Friends it will, by my lights, be a great loss to the world. But if it happens let it happen explicitly and honestly. Let's not lose the Peace Testimony by forgetting what it is.

Ruth's message also discussed the general topic of what holds Quakerism together, noting that "Friends may have a wide variety of theological views and still be Friends." We may now be more known for this open-ended and undefined quality than for anything specific that we stand for. Perhaps this attitude makes us more attractive to potential members who don't want to be challenged or confronted to change in any way when they come among us. I fear that it makes us less attractive to people who come to us searching desperately for spiritual and moral grounding.

In the beginning, Friends were known for a quite different attitude. They became Quakers because they did believe certain things, and not only believed them but lived them. They were conspicuous among other religious groups, not in having a variety of "positions" on controversial questions, but in being impressively united in strict adherence to very specific disciplines. They attended public worship even when they knew soldiers would come to drag them away to prison. They refused to pay tithes to the state-supported church even when they knew they could lose their farms and livelihoods. Even their theology, while not set down in creedal statements, was pretty firm and definite. They believed that Christ was a living presence able to guide and direct them, enabling them not only to be forgiven for past sins, but to live righteous and upright lives in the present.

Of course, as Ruth says in her message, faith must grow and change. But as it does so, we need to continue to be able to speak about what it is. If people come to us looking for the bread of life, let's not offer them the stone of "whatever you think is fine with us."

I would have to go beyond the light I have been given to provide an answer as to what Quakers must believe today in order to be Quakers. That discernment would have to be done by whole Meetings and wider groups as well. Moreover, I realize that whatever words may be found to express that "minimum," it will always have to be interpreted in the Spirit, sensitively and openly. But surely we need as a people to find *something* that is essential and defining for us. To be vague and noncommittal is not the same as being truly open and truly embracing. Let's stop saying that you don't have to believe anything in particular

in order to be a Friend. And then let's start thinking and praying in order to understand what our spiritual "bottom line" really is.

John Edminster evokes the experience of an early convert to Quakerism to remind us that Friends did not invent the Peace Testimony, but rather found themselves commanded to take it up by a living God who convinced them of it. John invites Friends to utilize questioning and disagreement over the Peace Testimony to anchor it on firm ground:

Ruth Kinsey's message touched this Friend's heart, and I rejoice to hear the message to "encourage the people you disagree with." I think Farmington Friends *are* being faithful in trying to love one another, and encourage one another, in spite of disagreement over the Peace Testimony. Loving God, and loving one another, is *the* fundamental thing. After all, Jesus did not say, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, that ye disown one another for expressing opinions that you consider stupid."

I too have been deeply concerned over reports that the Peace Testimony is in trouble among American Friends. It may, of course, be a good thing that the Peace Testimony is being challenged. It may be that, for many of us, the Peace Testimony has been built on sand and now the time has come for us to rebuild it, under the Lord's guidance, on rock.

Is Quakerism without the Peace Testimony unthinkable? I think not, because if we're faithful to the Lord as we understand Him (or Her or It), and remain in the loving fellowship, He will give us back *any* right testimony that we've fallen away from. But if we hold to the Peace Testimony and let the loving fellowship go, we might not get the loving fellowship back. My faith that the Lord can make the Peace Testimony spring up where it was absent before is reinforced by my reading of the story of Thomas Lurting.

In *The Fighting Sailor Turn'd Peaceable Christian* (London 1709), Thomas Lurting tells the story of his conviction and conversion to nonviolence. After the Lord had commanded Thomas to fight no more, he called a meeting and told colleagues of his call and his intentions, explicitly leaving them free to act each according to his own conscience. And then they and he acted in unity as an engagement neared, openly defying orders to go to their battle stations and, wonder of wonders, living to tell about it. The fear of God drove out their fear of men. There was true Spirit-led Quakerism on board Thomas Lurting's ship before any of the men aboard the *Bristol* had ever heard of Quakers refusing to fight. (His story can be read online at [www.users.voicenet.com/~kuenning/qhp/lurting.html](http://www.users.voicenet.com/~kuenning/qhp/lurting.html).)

It happens that I find the Just War Theory devilish and hateful, a disease that I wish all Friends, all Christians, all people of faith, could be healed of. But it won't

be driven away by my shouting at it. It was plausible to great and wise Christian elders like Augustine and Gregory. It can even *almost* be teased out of the teachings of Paul, such as the “magistrate’s sword” statement in Romans 13 that:

The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.... Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

But in his Epistle No. 188 (1659), George Fox gives grounding to our faith that living in the Light does not permit even taking up the "magistrate’s sword":

Live in the seed of God that destroys the devil, who is the author and cause of wars and strife. . . . Yet ye that are in that seed, see that ye accuse no man falsely, that hath the sword of justice, which is to keep the peace . . . this is owned in its place. But he that killeth with the sword, must perish with the sword. . . . And Friends take heed of blending yourselves with the outward powers of the earth.

Paul Busby challenges us to explore deeply why we work for peace. He asks:

- Can love overcome violence and hate? Or are we rationalizing or fooling ourselves? Are we committed to love even if it doesn’t lead to the results we want?
- Are we more concerned by process or by results? Can we describe with specificity the results we seek? Are we even clear about the results we do want?
- Are we prepared for “failure”? If love doesn’t succeed in overcoming violence and hate, are we connected with whatever it is that inspires and sustains us so that we do not despair?
- If we are sustained by scripture, what do we think of Joel’s statement that they shall beat their pruning hooks into swords?
- Are we willing to continue and continue and continue, constantly renewing our source of strength and love, regardless of apparent results? Are we prepared to live with, and act within, the outcome regardless of what it is?

Friends continue to walk paths toward the peaceable kingdom. In the coming weeks, these include:

- A **Quaker Outdoor Meeting for Worship** on September 11th from 6:30 to 7:30 P.M. at Bowling Green Park, Lower Manhattan, New York City (5 blocks from the former World Trade Center). The Downtown Manhattan (Outdoor) Meeting for Worship, formed in recent months by New York Quarterly Meeting, has offered a unique experience over the summer to Friends in the New York City area and has brought to Friends a sense of closeness with nature and with the public that the first generation Friends must have had (since they worshiped outdoors). The meeting is held each Fifth Day (Thursday) at 6:30 P.M. in Manhattan's Bowling Green Park, a half-acre public park in the Financial District of New York City, under large sycamore trees, near a fountain among flowers and the feel of harbor breezes and the sounds of birds chirping and of city life.

The ad hoc Committee for Downtown Manhattan Meeting invites Friends from four yearly meetings - Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and New England - as well as any other Friends, or friends of Friends, to worship with them Thursday, September 11th, at this lovely location adjacent to the former World Trade Center. "What many New Yorkers see as a crass fascination with a horrific and tragic event as many tourists descend on 'Ground Zero,' we offer a chance for Friends to remember those who died that day and to sit in the silence and wait for the still small voice to lead us." Find the Friends with the flowers on the table. For more information e-mail [OutdoorMeeting@earthlink.net](mailto:OutdoorMeeting@earthlink.net), or call 212-777- 8866. Directions to the Outdoor Meeting can be gotten at [www.nyclistings.com](http://www.nyclistings.com) (search for "Quaker").

- Elmira Friends Peace Studies Group, together with Pax Christi-Elmira and Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier, will offer events on September 11th under the theme **Cultivate Peace - Grow Community** at Wisner Park in Elmira. A public information booth at the Elmira Farmer's Market from 10:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. will feature a "listening post" on which visitors are invited to express thoughts on 9/11, persons they would like to remember on that day, or a vision of the world they wish to hand on to their children, and will have information on ways to cultivate peace and to grow community. From 7:00-7:30 P.M., a silent candlelight Circle of Hope will gather in Wisner Park to remember the victims of the 9/11 attacks and their survivors, and to pray for universal peace, with an open discussion in the Park Church Meeting rooms following the vigil. For more information contact Kathleen Gale of the Elmira Friends Peace Studies Group at [prrts@aol.com](mailto:prrts@aol.com), or Patricia Ladley of Pax Christi-Elmira at [ladley@lightlink.com](mailto:ladley@lightlink.com).

- A meeting of the **New Jersey Coalition against War in Iraq** will be held on Wednesday, September 17th, at 7:30 P.M. at New Brunswick Friends Meetinghouse, 109 Nichol Avenue, New Brunswick, N.J. Information will shortly be available on the Web site of the NJ Coalition for Peace Action [www.peacecoalition.org/index.shtml](http://www.peacecoalition.org/index.shtml).

- A **Training for Counselors on Military Discharges and GI Rights**, sponsored by American Friends Service Committee, Purchase Quarterly Meeting, and New York Yearly Meeting's Peace Committee, will be held on Saturday, September 27th, from

9:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. at the AFSC office at 15 Rutherford Place in New York City. The program will train counselors to provide guidance and referrals to persons in the armed forces whose military experience is crystalizing into conscientious objection to participation in war, or who are experiencing problems with harassment, discrimination, or other difficulties connected with their military experience. For the New York Metropolitan area, volunteers currently answer GI Rights Hotline phones at the War Resisters League office in Manhattan on Thursday evenings, and in Purchase Quarter on Monday evenings from 6:00 to 9:00 P.M. and Tuesday evenings from 4:30-8:30 P.M. This training will help meet the need for more volunteers to cover additional shifts. The registration fee is \$10.00, and space is limited to 25 persons. To register, or for more information, contact Rosa Packard at rpackard@optonline.net or at 203-661-8946.

In care,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, Fred Dettmer  
NYYM Worship and Action working group

There is a certain indolence in us, a wish not to be disturbed, which tempts us to think that when things are quiet all is well. Subconsciously, we tend to give the preference to "social peace," though it be only apparent, because our lives and possessions seem then secure. Actually, human beings acquiesce too easily in evil conditions; they rebel far too little and too seldom. There is nothing noble about acquiescence in a cramped life or mere submission to superior force.

*A. J. Muste, Pacifism and Class War (1928)*

Unjust laws and practices survive because men obey them and conform to them. This they do out of fear. There are things they dread more than the continuance of the evil.

The nonviolence of my conception is a more active and more real fighting against wickedness than retaliation whose very nature is to increase wickedness. I contemplate a mental and, therefore, a moral opposition to immoralities. I seek entirely to blunt the edge of the tyrant's sword, not by putting up against it a sharper-edged weapon, but by disappointing his expectation that I would be offering physical resistance. The resistance of the self that I should offer instead would elude him. It would at first dazzle him, and at last compel recognition from him, which recognition would not humiliate him but would uplift him. It may be urged that this again is an ideal state. And so it is. The propositions from which I have drawn my arguments are as true as Euclid's definitions, which are none the less true because in practice we are unable to even draw Euclid's line on a blackboard.

[A living faith in nonviolence] is impossible without a living faith in God. A nonviolent man can do nothing save by the power and grace of God. Without it

he won't have the courage to die without anger, without fear and without retaliation. Such courage comes from the belief that God sits in the hearts of all and that there should be no fear in the presence of God.

*Mahatma Gandhi*