

**Testimony at Hearings on New York City Council Resolution 367
in Support of the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund Bill
June 9, 2005**

Good afternoon. My name is Linda Chidsey and I am grateful for this opportunity to testify on behalf of New York Yearly Meeting (NYYM) of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). NYYM comprises meetings (churches) and worship groups throughout New York State as well as parts of Connecticut and New Jersey. As Presiding Clerk of NYYM, I preside at Annual and Representative Business Sessions and I am the Yearly Meeting's representative to the governing body of the New York State Council of Churches.

I am here today to fulfill both a personal obligation to speak, as well as to speak on behalf of NYYM. I begin this testimony by saying that both NYYM (on July 29, 2004) and the NYS Council of Churches (on June 23, 2004) have endorsed and expressed their full support of Resolution 367. NYS Council of Churches membership includes American Baptist Churches, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Empire Baptist Missionary Convention, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, Religious Society of Friends, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.

For over 30 years NYYM has adopted Minutes supporting versions of the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Bill and has provided ways of assisting employees and members who, for reasons of conscience, cannot pay taxes that support the military. The Yearly Meeting's endorsement of Resolution 367 is the most recent expression of Friends' longstanding commitment to peacemaking and nonviolent resolution of conflict.

Since the beginnings of our Religious Society, we have understood our role as followers of Christ to be one of helping establish the peaceable kingdom on earth. We believe in the sanctity of life, the oneness of humanity, and that each person carries within them a measure of the Divine Light of God. We take seriously the life and teachings of Jesus, and hear "thou shalt not kill" and "resist not evil with evil" as words to live by.

Many are familiar with Friends through our testimonies. In the Religious Society of Friends, the word "testimony" is used to describe a corporate witness to Truth which is revealed deep within the human heart. This Truth is meant to be lived out in everyday life—at all times, in all places, in all our relationships. Friends' historic peace testimony was formally articulated in 1660 by George Fox and other founders of Quakerism, in a Declaration to Charles II:

We do utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretense whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world...; the 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 Kingdoms of this world.

This is the stock from which present day Friends come. The conduct of NYYM members today is guided by what are known as “Advices and Queries” contained in our Book of Discipline. The 14th Advice reads:

Friends are earnestly cautioned against the taking of arms against any person, since “all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons” are contrary to our Christian testimony. Friends should beware of supporting preparations for war even indirectly, and should examine in this light such matters as non-combatant military service, cooperation with conscription, employment or investment in war industries, and voluntary payment of war taxes.

So what relevance do the beliefs and testimonies of an historic peace church have for the life of an individual? How do they inform our thoughts and actions following events such as took place here in this city on September 11, 2001? As for myself, I struggled for days with the question of whether our historic peace testimony was anything more than a lofty ideal, impossible to live out in a world where such horrific events take place.

Then in early October, a friend accompanied me to Ground Zero where, praying and weeping, we saw what had happened. Several days later a transformative insight—an “in-the-bone knowing”—came to me, and it was this: Each one of us has a part to play in the reconciliation and redemption of that horrendous event and others like it. It came to me that here was our opportunity to take up and engage the radical teachings of Jesus; an opportunity to “put down the sword” and begin the work of peacemaking in earnest. For me this “knowing” has brought home the critical need to study and learn from instances where active peacemaking and nonviolent intervention have been successful.

There are a number of Friends in NYYM who have taken the radical teachings of Jesus to heart and who witness to the peace of Christ through conscientious objection to military taxation. There are countless others who uphold and support them in that witness. As a Yearly Meeting body, we celebrate and affirm their faithfulness. Many of these Friends are present in this room.

As I testify today, I am moved that out of a city that suffered such pain and loss on September 11, 2001, comes a Resolution which offers hope and lifts up the possibility of healing through peaceful means. I am grateful to the forward-looking Council members who urge support of the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund which would enable citizens to exercise their right of conscience. As a private citizen, and on behalf of NYYM and the NY State Council of Churches, I urge all members of the Council to place their vote in support of Resolution 367.

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