

WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP, AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

LETTER 130

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19 Exeter Place, Rotorua 3015, New Zealand.

widerquakerfellowship@quaker.org.nz

Dear Friends,

Since the May letter was sent out I have heard of the deaths of four of our Fellowship members. One of these, with the help of her family, achieved the grand old age of 92 and was able to maintain an active and cheerful presence in her local meeting until the end. Quakers would wish to remember and give thanks for that of God in the lives of all these people.

In view of the forthcoming General Election I thought it would be appropriate to bring forward some thoughts on decision-making. This is a topic that has exercised Quakers ever since the Society was first formed. You will see that Friends acting under concern often have to face dilemmas that seem impossible to resolve. Sometimes they have had to make unpalatable compromises in order to contribute to their vision for the greater good.

Quaker practice of decision-making is used in all local, Monthly and Yearly Meetings, committees and other working groups. Business is conducted in the spirit of worship, the purpose being to seek the will of God, not to reach a majority decision or consensus of opinion. Waiting together for guidance and unity is considered to be essential, rather than a luxury to be enjoyed only if the business is not urgent or practical. When the right way becomes clear, it may not have seemed obvious at the start of the meeting. The gathered community tests, supports and encourages concerns – this is important because individually, we are unlikely to reach our full spiritual potential, and can mislead ourselves. Friends are expected to uphold the meeting and its decisions even if they were unable to attend in person.

In this modern age the pace of life and the need for conservation of energy has led Friends wishing to make a contribution to decision-making to explore the use of tele- and video-conferencing for some of their business meetings. This is a compromise that loses the value of physical presence but gains the involvement of distant and isolated Friends. The use of periods of silence to reinforce the spiritual presence seems to be a paradox in this context - but it is possible and it does work!

Until we are all equally “computerate” there will be no really effective substitute for personal attendance at meetings and communication by paper and post. Our WQF Letters are intended to encourage both these forms of involvement in the meantime.

Yours in Friendship,

Ruth Gadgil.

DECISION-MAKING and POLITICS

It has been said that voting in General and Local Elections is the only way in which the ordinary citizen can influence society. Quakers realise that the national decision-making process differs from their business practice, and that the country cannot wait until universal clearness is reached. It must respond to majority opinion solicited by politicians and activists. Many Quakers have found that in order to bring about change they must accept the challenges of becoming activists and politicians.

From Britain Yearly Meeting's *Quaker Faith and Practice 1995*:

“Remember your responsibility as citizens for the government of your town and country, and do not shirk the effort and time this may demand. ... Seek to discover the causes of social unrest, injustice and fear; try to discern the new growing-points in social and economic life.”

Advices, 1964 [23.01]

“Politics’ cannot be relegated to some outer place, but must be recognised as one side of life, which is as much the concern of religious people and of a religious body as any other part of life. Nay, more than this, the ordering of the life of man in a community, so that he may have the chance of a full development, is and always has been one of the main concerns of Quakerism.”

Lucy F. Morland, 1919 [23.06]

The following extracts give some idea of the struggles faced by two Quakers who achieved eminence as politicians:

John Bright (1811-89) was a British Radical and Liberal statesman, one of the greatest orators of his generation, and a strong critic of British foreign policy. Bright sat in the House of Commons from 1843 to 1889, promoting free trade, electoral reform and religious freedom. He was almost a lone voice in opposing the Crimean War; he also opposed Gladstone’s proposed Home Rule for Ireland.

“Although at one time there were grave doubts in the minds of many Friends as to the whether it was desirable for members of our Society to engage in active political life ... it has been evident in John Bright’s case that he entered upon it under a deep sense of duty, and that he endeavoured to carry his Christianity with him into all his public life.”

Testimony of Marsden Monthly Meeting concerning John Bright (1811-1889) who was a member of parliament for over 40 years and held ministerial office. [23.07]

“As one of the greatest politicians of his day, John Bright would have been the first to admit that he had not been a completely consistent Friend throughout his long career; that the testimonies of his religious society were counsels of perfection which a practical politician could not uphold in all their purity.”

“Other Friends in Parliament during the nineteenth century tended to share many of John Bright’s views. Men like Arnold Rowntree also represented family commercial interests. While representing the values of social capitalism rather than the emerging values of socialism, they continued to speak out on many traditional Quaker humanitarian concerns.”

1990 James Backhouse Lecture: “Quakers in Politics: Pragmatism or Principle?”

Josephine ("Jo") Vallentine (b. 1946) is an Australian peace activist and politician, a former senator for Western Australia. She entered the Senate in 1985 after election as a member of the Nuclear Disarmament Party but sat as an independent and then as a member of the Greens Western Australia from 1 July 1990. She resigned on 31 January 1992.

“The ingredients which lead me to be in this uncomfortable space are: firstly, the indisputable fact that social inequities and environmental mismanagement have put humanity on the endangered species

list – in other words we are in a crisis situation; secondly, that humanity shares enormous resources of ingenuity to resolve many of the problems we face; thirdly, that with whatever skills I can muster, to ensure that the planet is better off for my being here.”

“What is clear is that in the end the choice is between staying pure or getting involved and making compromises. Quakers, through history, have been strong individualists, better at lobbying or working on single issues than at going into party politics and accepting the necessary compromises.”

1990 James Backhouse Lecture: “Quakers in Politics: Pragmatism or Principle?”

Perhaps the final word should come from an Attender at the recent Yearly Business meeting:

“One of the effects of this on me personally led to reflections on how I and our movement are challenged to bring these concerns into the forefront of our consciousness as if to say, “Now, what can we do about this?” At least a beginning is to resolve “to hold in the Light” the matters and those intimately concerned and involved with them.”

Charles Naylor, Aotearoa Friends Newsletter 96 (3) 2014

At the Quaker Settlement, 76 Virginia Rd. Whanganui 4500:

October 10-12 Treaty Issues

Join the Treaty Issues Group in a weekend of presentations, discussions and working sessions designed to update and inform understanding of what Te Tiriti / The Treaty of Waitangi means, its status and likely developments and possibilities for the future.
Settlement Contact: Judith Robinson: judith.robinsonqa@gmail.com

Standing in this Place - supporting indigenous justice in the post-settlement period. the 2014 Quaker Lecture

Printed copies of this lecture given by David James, Jillian Wychel, Murray Short and Linda Wilson at Yearly Meeting can be obtained from Quaker Book Sales (quaker.books@quaker.org.nz) at a price of \$10 per copy, p&p included.

The presenters will accept invitations to deliver the lecture verbally in various parts of the country. Their insights should be of interest to all New Zealanders – not just Quakers or Maori.

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is an association of persons of diverse backgrounds who wish to have ties with the Religious Society of Friends without necessarily being in its membership, or who, through isolation, illness or some other circumstance are unable to attend a Monthly Meeting.

Any person who finds the fundamental Quaker testimonies and the Quaker way of life, with its emphasis on sincerity and simplicity, compatible with his or her philosophy of life is welcome to join the Fellowship. A request to the Clerk will ensure enrolment as a member.