

WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP, AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

LETTER 143

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Dear Friends,

At last the waiting is over and we know what the new New Zealand Government will look like. Whether we like it or not, we have all been responsible for its formation, and must now hope that a fresh approach may help to relieve some of the suffering that we know exists even in our apparently prosperous country.

During the leadup to the General Election I was thinking a lot about Quaker discernment. There were so many issues to contemplate and many of us have only an incomplete understanding of the forces that control us. In an ideal world we would all be working towards the same goals. That would be true unity. Most of us however are unsure of the best ways to relieve suffering. We see unsurmountable complications at every turn.

Quaker process is based on Spirit-led decision-making. In our business meetings change is only acceptable when Spirit-led unity has been achieved. Our first advice is to listen to the promptings of love and truth in our own hearts ... so that love may grow in us and guide our lives.

I was heartened, and grateful too, to hear our Prime Minister mention "kindness" in one of her speeches. I wonder how many political speeches have included that word?

Yours in Friendship,

Ruth Gadgil

Clerk.

What do Quakers say about discernment?

Remember your responsibility as citizens for the government of your town and country, and do not shirk the effort and time this may demand. Do not be content to accept things as they are, but keep an alert and questioning mind. Seek to discover the causes of social unrest, injustice and fear; try to discern the new growing-points in social and economic life. Work for an order of society which will allow men and women to develop their capacities and will foster their desire to serve.

Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith and Practice 1995: 23.01.

The right conduct of our meetings for church affairs depends upon all coming to them in an active, seeking spirit, not with minds already made up on a particular course of action, determined to push this through at all costs. But open minds are not empty minds, nor uncritically receptive: the service of the meeting calls for knowledge of facts, often painstakingly acquired, and the ability to estimate their relevance and importance.

Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith and Practice 1995: 3.05

Achieving clarity about a concern is a particular exercise in discernment. It is a process that begins with considerable private reflection and the asking of some tough questions. Is this a desire that someone else do something or is it really a call to act oneself?

Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith and Practice 1995: 13.05

Quaker worship gave me time and space to dissolve my hard shell of self-centredness; to be sensitive to discern things with fairness and unaffected by prejudice. I felt the need to be faithful to truth instead of relying on existing judgment.

Susumu Ishitani 1989: *Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith and Practice 1995: 24.16*

What is required is a willingness to listen to what others have to say rather than to persuade them that one's own point of view represents what is right and proper. It also requires restraint. ... When conflict comes, as it does, and the temptation to compromise – to seek consensus – is resisted, the sense of divine guidance is unmistakably registered. New possibilities for a way forward which nobody has thought of emerge out of discussion. Postponement and delay settle minds and assist the process of coming to a united mind. Above all, those who take opposing views come to find that the discipline of waiting has mysteriously united them.

John Punshon 1987: *Britain Yearly Meeting Quaker Faith and Practice 1995: 2.90*

To discern the leading of the Spirit we listen for promptings within ourselves and in the ministry of others. This does not mean that we don't use our brains or think. It does mean, however, that we try to open ourselves to an awareness of the working of the Spirit ...

Roger Walmsley 2003; *This we can say: Australian Quaker Life, Faith and Thought 2003: 2.37.*

Discernment is the constant, prayerful discipline we can (must, in fact) follow to find clarity about openings, different paths or timing, and to guard against self-interest on the one hand and human scepticism on the other. It is about paying attention to God's guidance, not about taking control ourselves.

Helen Bayes 2003; *This we can say: Australian Quaker Life, Faith and Thought 2003: 2.54*

“Reginald Reynolds comments that historically Friends had ‘a testimony’ against even participating in government, and it was clear to him why there was good reason for this testimony, because as the wealthier Friends of the time became entangled by property interests and politics, they began to see a case for armed resistance.

For government, in the temporal sense of political machinery to coerce, can only, if challenged, exert authority by force. Friends too, had their ‘government’, but this was based on a system of church discipline, which was purely moral. Their theoretical attitude to temporal power could only be anarchistic, if they were consistent; though they sought no deliberate conflict with authority, and could only have hoped, by natural growth and the spreading of their ideas, to replace temporal government by spiritual order ...

Such, indeed, is the logic of temporal power; and those who cannot see their way to follow it to its conclusion cannot participate in government as it was understood in Woolman's time, and as it still functions today. By the non-participation of Friends in government and their non-cooperation in coercive measures, the unlimited growth of Quakerism in its pure form would undoubtedly bring government to a standstill. It would be replaced by a system of voluntary personal and corporate discipline, unequalled in the history of the State. Pure Quakerism is rarely found; but where it is, as we find it in the life of Woolman and a few others, it offers a complete alternative to politics.

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 going into party politics and accepting the necessary compromises.”

Peter D. Jones; *Quakers in Politics: Pragmatism or Principle? The 26th James Backhouse Lecture 1990.*

Jo Vallentine, who was an Independent Western Australian Senator for 7 years, had this to say:

“Considering the stresses, the emotional costs – why bother? Life would be much simpler without making a commitment to work in the political arena, which is one reason why not many Quakers get involved. I respect that distancing and I certainly look forward to the time when I can choose another path. But for the moment I am engaged in this ever-fascinating journey. At the same time, I realise that there are multitudes of other ways of being effective towards social change. ... It is my hope that Quakers, and others, will not find what I have said about the dilemmas of political life daunting, but rather an encouragement to be bold in whatever way is appropriate, as guided by the light within.”

Quakers in Politics: Pragmatism or Principle? The 26th James Backhouse Lecture 1990.

Marian Hobbs, a Quaker whose political career spanned a period of 12 years in the New Zealand Government, holds a similar view:

“My life experience so far, has thrown up many challenges. But although I have never really had to face the challenge of personally taking another’s life, I have felt the weight of Government decisions which may well have led to loss of life, such as sending soldiers to Afghanistan and to the Solomon Islands. Connecting with the goodness in each human being has, however, often been a challenge in political work, especially in our adversarial style of political argument. ... We need to inform ourselves so that we can challenge the culture of fear and blame.

Back in the days of being a Labour MP, we went off on summer holidays with instructions in our ears of what to introduce into barbecue conversations. We need to do this too. If our [Quaker] forebears could go to jail because they stood in downtown Wellington to speak about pacifism, then we should be able to introduce these issues at the pub or the dinner table.”

A Peaceful World: how can we make it so? The 2016 Quaker Lecture. The Religious Society of Friends in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Summer Gathering 2017/18
will be at Ngamuwahine Outdoor Education Lodge located in the foothills of the Kaimai Ranges
near Tauranga
Monday 28th December 2017 to
Monday 4th January 2018
Theme: “Back to Basics”

If you are interested, please phone
Dave Wicks: 07 307 7213 or email summer.gathering.nz@gmail.com

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.