

Common Grace Aotearoa

Challenging unjust structures with love and determination

BY MICHAEL HARCOURT

This article introduces Quakers to Common Grace Aotearoa, a recently established activist group that has nonviolence as one of its guiding values. In addition, the article reports back to the wider community, detailing some recent Quaker financial support of this group and its mahi.

As a Christian Quaker, brought up in liberal and high Anglican circles, the two major Christian festivals of Christmas and Holy Week create a tension for me. Do I go to church or Meeting? Meeting for Worship doesn't feel quite 'Christian' enough and Church doesn't feel quite Quaker enough. This tension has grown in recent years, and Common Grace Aotearoa has allowed me to bridge my two faith traditions in ways that speak to the prophetic position that both demand.

By this I mean speaking and acting against injustice while simultaneously recognising that I am embedded and implicated in the brokenness of the world. The prophetic position moves beyond outrage and the sense of superiority that comes with aligning with certain groups and values, no matter how honourable they might be. It is, of course, a difficult position to find in a world with so many issues of injustice demanding our attention.

If you haven't heard of Common Grace Aotearoa (CGA), it is a Christian organisation that seeks to challenge unjust structures in Jesus-centred ways. You likely saw in the media the open letter from nearly 600 Church leaders (including Quakers) opposing the Treaty Principles Bill (which Quakers additionally submitted against). CGA planned this and was also one of the biggest single donors to the activist group Toitū te Tiriti that planned the hīkoi in November 2024.

In his memoir *Dancing with History - A life for Peace and Justice*, George Lakey describes his involvement with a group called AQAG, or 'A Quaker Action Group'. This was established during President Johnson's escalation of violence during the Vietnam War, and it was a group that 'would play the rebel role in the ecology of Quaker organisations'. In many ways, I see Common Grace Aotearoa playing a 'rebel role' among faith traditions in Aotearoa. CGA is committed to taking action against unjust structures from a deliberate position of love and nonviolence, and in ways that draw on the best of social change theory and advocacy methods. Circling back to the earlier mention of Holy Week, theologians Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg conclude their book *The Last Week* by emphasising the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter, in addition to the many powerful personal meanings. They write that 'Easter affirms that the domination systems of this world are not of God and that they do not have the final word'. CGA is one of the few public and activist Christian groups I know that recognises the political demands of the Christian life, the reality of contemporary systems of domination and the necessity of activist and advocacy methods to bring about what Martin Luther King called the 'Beloved Community'.

CGA draws its name from an Australian organisation called Common Grace. While separate entities, both groups tackle similar issues. In Aotearoa, campaign teams organise around three major projects:

- Electricity poverty
- Climate justice
- Te Tiriti justice



2024 hikoi to Parliament

My involvement in 2024 was in the Te Tiriti justice team. I worked with a team of people including the two co-directors, Alex Johnston and Kate Day, on a range of different kaupapa. One of these projects was applying to Wellington Monthly Meeting for support in our application to the Testimony Fund for a financial grant to oppose the Treaty Principles Bill. Although this bill has now been voted down, it leaves a number of other major issues to deal with that could further damage the relationship between Māori and the Crown, sow social division, and further promote corporate interests with little regard for environmental protection or Indigenous rights. A pressing concern, of course, is the coalition government's sponsorship of the innocuous sounding Regulatory Standards Bill, which Quakers recently opposed in the submissions process.

The Quaker Testimony Fund, with support from Wellington Monthly Meeting, generously contributed nearly \$5000 towards the work Common Grace Aotearoa is doing to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This grant came at a time when Christians across Aotearoa were mobilising to encourage their churches to write informed submissions to engage with (and oppose) the Treaty Principles Bill. The money was particularly useful in developing resources such as submission guides and video workshops and Common Grace Aotearoa was extremely grateful to receive this. Around 160 churches have used these resources and, considering the overwhelming opposition to the bill reflected in submissions, this no doubt made an important difference. The next major job for the Te Tiriti campaign team is to protect Māori wards, one critical tool we have in this country for ensuring Māori interests are recognised and protected against the assimilating trend of the tyranny of the majority.

Although I have had to step back (for the moment) from active involvement in a campaign team, I feel privileged to be associated with this group and its mahi. As a world we are undoubtedly living in deeply troubled times. Recently I was in a workshop (ironically one on hope) that asked everyone to brainstorm "what makes me feel hopeless?". This is not a question I relate to very much. What makes me afraid? Or angry about the world? What gives me courage? Those are questions I can answer. But hopeless? Hope, according to Cornel West, is the 'energy to be courageous, to bear witness, to see what the end is going to be'. This definition of hope rings true with new translations of George Fox's letter from Launceston Prison that replaces the older term 'cheerfully', with a different one: As Quakers we should 'walk courageously over the world, answering that of God in everyone'. For me, it is through participation in the work of Common Grace Aotearoa that fosters this courage and the hope that it generates.

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