

Are Quakers Past Their Use-by Date?

The Religious Society of Friends

BY JAN MARSH

It is almost impossible to imagine the conditions in seventeenth century England that gave rise to the Society of Friends. The wearying years of civil war had created a yearning for peace. Religious conformity was savagely enforced by torture and brutal executions as the country swerved from Catholic to Protestant and back at the whim of the rulers. A mere two generations prior, reading the Bible in English was punished by death because of the threat it posed to the power of the priests, who were exposed as ignorant and duplicitous.

And that's leaving aside the daily hardships of poverty, hard manual labour, poor housing and high child mortality, with repeated violent epidemics such as bubonic plague and other devastating illnesses.

Out of this harsh crucible came the vision of George Fox and other seekers for a more equal, just and peaceful life. Sincere, spiritually minded people were beginning to find their own path as they could read the teachings of Jesus first-hand and learn to have confidence in their own inner light. The development of the testimonies makes absolute sense in this context and time when there was a radical revisioning of a more grassroots, loving way of life.

Today, the values the testimonies encapsulate are part of everyday goals of education and enshrined in bills of rights.

Quakers have been behind or at least part of many international movements for peace and justice – both Greenpeace and Amnesty International had Quaker co-founders, Martin Luther King had Quaker support, Friends' Ambulance Service was well-known during the two world wars and there will be Friends in most humanitarian and environmental organisations. No longer cutting edge, these organisations are widely respected and have diverse membership now and their values have been adopted in other groups. Has the Quaker leaven done its job? Is it no longer needed?

As I look around the meeting room on a Sunday morning, most of the bowed heads are silver-haired and most Friends are of European descent, varying from Pākehā, to English or American. I, now seventy years old, am one of the younger ones, and only a few still work for a living. When I came to Nelson in 1991 the meeting was a small group of gentle elderly Friends who all passed away in the subsequent five to ten years. I have seen Nelson Recognised Meeting wax and wane, sometimes growing with the addition of families whose children then grow up and move away; sometimes shrinking with the loss of our elders or of regular attenders

who find their needs better met elsewhere. Newcomers join us after public events such as Quaker Quest and our summer meetings have in the past been swelled by overseas visitors some of whom returned every year, but the numbers remain around the 16-20 mark. Since Covid, average attendance on a Sunday is around ten.

An ageing membership is no doubt true of most Christian denominations, although down the road where they hire the rooms of the School of Music, a local charismatic church will bring in more than a hundred, with a barista and a barbecue afterwards for families to socialise. I don't envy them the rock band, the sausages or even the fresh coffee but I do wonder what it is that draws in younger people. I can see the attraction of fellowship and a sense of community but in our small quiet way we do that. In other cases, churches with harsh doctrines and impoverishing tithing still fill a big hall. That mystifies me. They seem so strident and authoritarian, so lacking in love, and yet they attract large numbers.

So what do Quakers offer Aotearoa in modern times? Why should we continue to exist?

Here in Nelson, we engage in the community and are known and respected in some circles – for our submissions to the Council on environmental and human rights issues, for our links with Māori to commemorate Parihaka Day, for our small but regular peace vigils on the Church Steps for significant dates such as Hiroshima Day. I'm sure each Meeting around the country is well thought of in a similar way.

Many of our values such as equality, peace, sustainability – are mainstream now. Where we once were radical in declaring that same sex couples should have their relationships acknowledged like any other couple, marriage equality now has national status. Conscientious objection is no longer necessary – it's unthinkable that any but professional soldiers would be sent to war, and even those are more often part of a peace-keeping mission than an aggressive force (and long may that continue). A simple, sustainable way of life is being urged on us all – admittedly a little late after the indulgence of the last 30 years has caused such destruction but our values in this area are again becoming mainstream.

Our method of conducting business meetings is unique if honestly adhered to but with many Friends no longer professing belief in God it might need adapting. Many organisations like the Green Party and collectives such as our local Women's House, have moved on from majority

decision-making and have adopted consensus as their guide. Friends assert that our business meetings are not aiming at consensus but are seeking God's will. For non-theists what does this mean? And are we always as disciplined and respectful as we need to be to achieve such a high goal?

There are also non-religious groups which seek to promote good living and community values: The School of Life, founded by philosopher Alain de Boton and others, seeks to deconstruct the social contribution of religion and present its functions without the need for belief in a supernatural being. Buddhism, which is non-theist, is popular among a cross-section of our society.

As I sat in Meeting recently, enjoying the sunshine coming through the windows and the flowers on the table, I pondered what I would miss if Quakers ceased to exist. I would miss the hour of silent worship on a Sunday morning which settles and grounds me and is different from the silence of meditating or the quiet hours of living alone.

I would miss the personal history bound up with Friends since I first attended Mt Eden Meeting with my two pre-schoolers nearly 40 years ago. I remember how delighted I was with the warm welcome, the mix of age groups, family camps at Waiheke and the feeling of excitement that rose in me as I came to Meeting each Sunday – what will happen in this next hour?

I would miss the more than 350 years of Quaker history, our forebears with their courage and insights which have been shared down the years in *Quaker Faith and Practice*. I would miss Quaker literature, the thoughtful essays and books which develop a unique spiritual process, and the occasional fiction – Elfrida Vipont's *Lark in the Morn* was my first awareness of Quakers when I read it, aged about 10.

I would miss my Friends with whom I enjoy chatting over tea each Sunday and those from around the country who come to Nelson to visit or get in touch by email.

To my mind, the essence of Quakerism lies in the name: Religious Society of Friends. Our purpose is to be a community which gives love and support to our members as we find our way through the trials and joys of life. For this we draw on our values, our inner Light and the insights of other Friends. It is important to remember that without this loving community we are no longer unique: there are many secular organisations which embody the values we profess.

Kindness and community are essential, or as Isaac Pennington put it:

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness: and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations against another; but praying one for another and helping one another up with a tender hand.
(1667)