

Quakers – Who are they?

This is a fair question! Quakers are a very small church in New Zealand with few members. Nevertheless they are influential in some organisations and the Society is a member of ecumenical Christian bodies in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The official name of the Society is, The Yearly Meeting of Christian Friends (Evangelical Quakers) in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The Religious Society of Friends came into being in England in the middle of the 17th Century. This was a time of considerable religious ferment. The country had just experienced a bitter civil war and was still divided. Many political and religious groups were competing for popular support and many people were seeking a religious basis for their lives, which they did not find in the churches of the time. One of these was a sturdy young man named George Fox. He spent much time questioning and listening to clerics of all sorts but found no answers that satisfied him. One day at the point of despair the words came to him, “There is one, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition.” Immediately he was shaken by this truth and he declared, “My heart did leap for joy.” He had realised that, as he was later to put it, “Jesus Christ had come to teach his people himself” and that there was no necessity for the intervention of a priest or minister. The living Christ was able to be experienced within every person. George Fox had found the message that would be the basis of all his teaching, which was that Christ is actively present to teach and guide everyone who “gathers in his name.”

George Fox then embarked on a life of teaching and witnessing to this inspiration. On listening to him many found their lives were changed. His influence was felt particularly in the Midlands and the North West of England. It was from this area that his followers spread out over the whole of England and Wales carrying his message. Their meetings were often

more emotionally charged than they would be today and they sometimes lasted for as long as three hours. Fox had no intention at the beginning of starting another sect. He was challenging people to live their faith. He maintained that the message of the early church had been lost as it became institutionalised. He believed it was possible to stand in the same state as the apostles and preach the gospel as they had done. That responsibility was laid upon all who experienced the power of the Light of Christ.

The Inward Light

Fox's revelation that the 'Inward Light of Christ' was in every person had many repercussions. It meant that the hitherto neglected or reviled members of society could also reflect the 'Light of Christ,' a belief that ultimately led to prison reform, care for the mentally sick and the rejection of war.

Fox knew his Bible and quoted from it frequently, nevertheless he did not believe it to be the sole revelation of God. What mattered was the power of the Spirit of God which informed and inspired the words and which can be experienced in the here and the now. Fox witnessed to an alternative Christianity quite different from the Churches of his time, one where personal experience of the Inward Light of Christ must come before what he called 'notions.' The experience was not dependent on the acceptance of a Christian creed.

Needless to say Fox and his followers soon found themselves up against both Church and State. They were thrown out of churches and beaten, brought before the magistrate and imprisoned for long periods. Some died in the appalling conditions of the prisons of that time. They acquired the name 'Quaker' because Fox had cautioned a magistrate he had been brought before by saying that he should "tremble at the word of the Lord"

and also possibly because in the power of the Spirit some shook and trembled before ministering in their meetings for worship.

Fox's emphasis on the primacy of the Inward Light of Christ could have resulted in excesses by those mistaking their inner convictions for true 'leadings.' This indeed did happen in the early days and it became apparent that there was a need for structure and organisation. A strong egalitarian tendency among Friends ensured that the organisation would be structured from the bottom up. There were no priests or bishops. Elders were appointed whose responsibility it was to see that Meetings were held in 'right ordering' and to encourage spiritual development. Those with the gift for vocal ministry were recognised as ministers and later overseers were appointed to be responsible for pastoral care.

The Living Silence

In those days Quakers met for worship in much the same way as we do today. Friends worship on the basis of silence which we describe as a 'living silence' in which we 'wait upon the Lord' trusting that the Indwelling Light of Christ will enable us to discern how our life and that of the Meeting should be ordered. (We describe this experience as 'openings'). Anyone is free to speak out of the silence if they are moved by the Spirit to do so. In the early days there would have been lengthy contributions or a Friend might read from the Bible or offer prayer. Today meetings are shorter, usually of approximately an hour and the ministry, as spoken contributions are called, would not be as lengthy. The silence is greatly valued by Friends. It provides a place where we can still our busy thoughts and with others be gathered into an experience of, or communion with, the Light of Christ within. Friends believe that this Light of Christ is universal, given to all people, even those who have never heard of the historic Christ.

The structure of the Society is set up so that members are able to participate in all decisions affecting the Society. It means that a concern of an individual member, at a local level can be agreed to by a Monthly Meeting, and will then be put before all other Monthly Meetings for consideration, and then passed on to the Yearly Meeting. If it is agreed to at this Meeting it then becomes a concern of the whole Society. No delegates are appointed and no hierarchy of members make decisions or policy. All members are encouraged to attend the business meetings which are held in the same spirit as the Meetings for Worship. Each Meeting appoints a Clerk to be the recipient of business matters and to bring these forward for the consideration of the Meeting.

It is the Clerk's responsibility to discern the feeling of the Meeting on each item of business and to write a minute conveying the decision arrived at. The minutes are signed in and on behalf of the Meeting. At no time is a vote taken. The method is similar to that of achieving consensus but it differs in that the aim is primarily to discern the 'will of God' for the Meeting and sometimes this means a minority view is accepted.

Those initially opposed might change their view during deliberations or decide not to stand in the way of the Meeting proceeding on a particular matter.

The leading of the Spirit has resulted in the Society developing Testimonies and whilst the acceptance of Christian doctrine is required, adherence to principles, which are referred to by Friends as Testimonies was, and is strongly encouraged.

Advices and Queries were drawn up in order to help individual Friends and Meetings to live up to the Testimonies. These are Peace, Simplicity, Integrity, Equality, and Community. Men and women have always had equal status within the Society. From the beginning Friends were strongly

egalitarian, refusing honours and titles. They lived simply, were encouraged to practice a simple lifestyle and a few in the UK and USA still continue to use the old ways of speech and dress.

Peace Testimony

Of the testimonies perhaps the best known and the most fundamental is the Peace Testimony. Friends believe that they should live, as George Fox put it, “in the virtue of that power that takes away the occasion of all war.” In this state it is inconceivable that they should engage in violence or take the life of another in whom they believe there is “that of God.” Confirmation of this, they believe, is to be found in the teaching of Jesus Christ. Friends, however, have for the most part been outward looking and their Peace testimony has never been mere passivity. They have worked for reconciliation of conflict in social and national areas. At the present time they maintain offices at the UN in both New York and Geneva and in the first and second World Wars they were involved in relief work. The social implications of Friends’ loyalty to the Inward Light of Christ has also resulted in them being at the forefront of the abolition of slavery, prison reform and the treatment of the mentally sick. Many people have come to know Quakers through their work for social justice and peace. Honesty in all aspects of life is stressed. In the early days Friends were prevented by law from attending University and so became involved in trade and banking. They became well known for their honest dealing. Now that they are no longer barred from University a great proportion of the membership are involved in teaching and social work.

In recent years Friends have worked for and made statements on many aspects of human rights including those of race, gender and gay sexual orientation. Quaker testimonies on simplicity and equality lead Friends to recognise that consumerism and over attachment to possessions are root causes of economic injustice.

There are some 378,000 members of the Society of Friends worldwide. Several different groups or traditions have arisen among Friends. There are those whose worship is ‘unprogrammed’ and based on silence in the manner previously described. There are others in ‘programmed’ meetings which are guided by a Pastor, have set hymns and an address. Other differences are complex and cannot be explained in this short article, but the ‘programmed’ meetings are essentially evangelical and Bible based. Nevertheless Friends of all persuasions have a number of procedures and beliefs in common, for instance, belief in the Inward Light of Christ, the Testimonies and the way decisions are made.

New Zealand Quakers

Though relatively a small group this is considerably increased when ‘Attenders’ are added. These are people who join Friends in worship and some of whom also take an active part in the social and business aspects of the Society but do not apply for membership. Amongst the total group all lay emphasis on the mystical aspects of Christian Quakerism, totally Christocentric, and maintain George Fox’s teaching on the universality of the Light of Christ within. However, Friends and attenders join in the Meeting for Worship together and cooperate in the work of the Society. The essential point here is that it is the theological dogma, history, tradition, procedures, and testimonies which hold the Society together rather than a Christian creed.

The majority of Yearly Meetings throughout the world are affiliated to a body known as the Friends’ World Committee for Consultation. This provides a vehicle to enable Friends to discover their common spiritual ground and for different groups to come together for consultation every three years. It is perhaps remarkable that the Society of Friends with no hierarchical structure can hold together as successfully as it does.

Friends today do not proselytize although they do a small amount of advertising which offers information about the Society. They hope that people hear about the Society through the work it undertakes. Individually they try “to let their lives speak” in the hope that this will bear witness to their faith.