

Attachment G Faith and Practice Proposals

Government

The power and dominion of the conscience are the province of God, [who] alone can properly instruct and govern it. No one whatsoever may lawfully force the conscience of others regardless of the authority or office he [or she] bears in the government of this world.

Robert Barclay, *Apology* (1676)

American government, endorsing the principles of equality, freedom, and justice, emerged from an intellectual and political climate influenced significantly by Friends. Today we affirm our corporate and individual commitment to influence governmental actions and policies through thoughtful witness rising from individual or corporate discernment.

When governmental policies or actions pose difficult problems for Friends, we respond in various ways. Some are led to withhold their assent or resist, and many work to improve those policies through individual or meeting action or support for Wider Quaker Organizations. Individual Friends often communicate with governmental representatives to encourage positive legislation and provide support to candidates who uphold the values expressed in Quaker testimonies.

Recognizing that the responsibilities of authority sometimes create spiritual dilemmas for those in government, we seek unity in Truth with those we want to influence and believe that this unity may be reached if we remain faithful in our witness. We therefore seek to encourage government officials to listen actively to a diversity of voices and negotiate to find mutually helpful solutions. As human beings, all of us sometimes find compromise expedient, even necessary; but the decisions of government officials affect far more lives than their own. We therefore seek to encourage them to hold to the standard of Truth in their actions.

To be true to our experience of the Spirit, Friends do not hold any human institution or individual opinion to be higher than corporately discerned Truth. Historically, Friends have often opposed governmental authority. From refusing to swear an oath in a court of law to hiding people escaped from slavery in our homes to providing sanctuary to undocumented immigrants, Friends have a long tradition of civil disobedience when conscience has demanded it.

Our relationship to government is complicated by the fact that Friends do not always agree about how to respond to government. For example, Friends have traditionally supported government recognition of conscientious objection to military service, yet some Friends have been led to participate in wars. Areas remain where Friends' corporate response to governmental policy has yet to be discerned. Individual Friends under the leadings of the Spirit have challenged the corporate body of Friends to consider witnesses such as war tax resistance, opposition to patriarchy, and support for marriage equality, fair immigration policies, and individual and family reproductive rights. As times change and as our understanding evolves, Friends will continue to wrestle with these and new issues.

As government policies change, so do Friends' responses change. Furthermore Friends testimonies often induce positive changes in governmental practices. In the process, Friends and government may both be transformed. Friends' steadfast and faithful efforts often have an influence that transcends initial expectations. While we work to see our principles reflected in governmental decisions and actions, we realize that government even at its best can only provide a framework to foster justice, peace, and respect for human differences. These ideals become reality only when individuals, under the conviction of love, live daily the life

of the blessed community, known to many Friends as the “Peaceable Kingdom.”

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Community

“As many candles, lighted and put in one place, do greatly augment the light, and make it more to shine forth, so when many are gathered together in the same life there is more of the glory of God.” Robert Barclay (1678)

"When we focus on our oneness and unity in the Love that is God, it's tempting to believe that we will all live happily ever after together, with never an unkind word or misunderstanding, much less legitimate complaints, anger or real nastiness. The challenge of course is to hold up and live out the vision while acknowledging and accepting the reality of our own flawed humanity and that of those we live with."

Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality: Corporate Practice Among Friends*, page 37

Community is one of the important foundations of Quakerism. This testimony arises from our experience that a group worshiping together encounters God. Since the first generation, Friends have had a practice of discernment where unity is the focus, looking not only to individual inspiration but also to the movement of Spirit in their midst. Friends followed this practice in meetings for worship with a concern for business. It was not the person with the most money, age, or length of history with Friends who made the decisions; it was the group as a whole that discerned the will of God. That sense of the meeting, that Spirit which the worshipers recognized in unity, was the authority.

Friends are bound together in community by our shared seeking of the Light. Our life together is grounded in the practice of listening deeply to each other and looking truthfully at how we live in the world. It is the task of the meeting community to affirm, inspire, and hold each of us accountable in our faithfulness to God's leadings.

Ministering to each other's spiritual and material needs builds and nurtures community. Both requesting and giving assistance are essential aspects of Friends' life together; taking a warm, personal interest in one another's welfare strengthens the meeting and the individuals alike. Such assistance may take the form of a clearness committee, financial or other material aid, or other appropriate help. Friends also provide spiritual and emotional support by holding in the Light those experiencing special hardship or joy. When we join in service and support, whether in our home communities, in the wider community or in the world, we express our love for God and one another.

Any community experiences difficulties. Open recognition of and respect for differences, forthright sharing, and sincere corporate reflection can strengthen the meeting as a whole and provide openings for new understanding. Friends should be encouraged to resolve conflicts in a direct loving manner because unresolved conflicts erode community. Conflicts affecting the whole meeting may be addressed through threshing sessions or worship sharing; SAYMA's Ministry and Nurture Committee may be called upon for help. Conflicts between individuals also affect meeting community; a clearness committee may be helpful in such cases. It is Quaker practice to prefer mediation or negotiation, avoiding litigation, to resolve disputes that cannot be resolved within the meeting. Harmony emerges not merely from coming to understanding and resolution but also from the mutual search for the truth conducted in a spirit of tender listening and care. Unity is not sameness of belief, but the oneness of people drawn together in love and concern for each other, grounded in the Spirit.

Quaker community extends beyond the monthly and yearly meetings. Yearly meeting sessions and committee work, inter-meeting visitations, regional gatherings, visiting other monthly and yearly meetings, and participation in Wider Quaker Organizations are all opportunities for Friends to find nurture, spiritual growth and fellowship. The interconnectedness of all life continues to call Friends to be full participants in the universal community. Our understanding of God's love does not stop at the meetinghouse door. Friends strive to build "the blessed community" everywhere we go. Our testimonies of peace, equality, integrity, simplicity and community mean little unless they are practiced in relation to all.

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