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Being the Quakers the World Needs

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The spiritual grounding of Quaker Social Action is in the practice of the Quaker religion. Quakers need to engage in religious education for all ages – for everyone who is exploring the Quaker way. Spiritual formation comes from doing the work. Reflection on practice informs practice. We need rhythms of rest and re-creation. Know that you are not alone.



The spiritual grounding of Quaker social action is in the practice of the Quaker religion. One of the things I've been reflecting on for the last several years, and that I brought to my work at Friends World Committee for Consultation, is the question of how we can be the Quakers the world needs in the times and places in which we live today. What this question is essentially asking is, what is the connection between our spiritual grounding and our social action, and how are we called to express Quakerism in ways particular to our own time and place? I will first share some of my starting points and context, and then share some specific ways I think Friends can journey toward being the Quakers the world needs.

To discuss the spiritual ground of Quaker witness, I will first note that as a woman with 30 years of personal experience as a Quaker, I use the name of God. There are other terms that are more useful for other people, but I believe the whole Quaker project does not make sense without a direct connection to the Divine and a clear understanding that God is always present to us, offering us a wealth of patience, strength, forgiveness, beauty, kindness, and mercy. We can get with that program or we can reject it, but I cannot deny that it is available.

Second, in the Quaker tradition, some of us refer to our local congregation as a monthly meeting and some call it a Friends church.¹ To me, they are equivalent. But I will use the term 'meeting' because that is what the congregation where I am a member calls itself. I've been a Quaker for 32 years now. For thirteen years, ending in 2024, I worked for the Friends World Committee for Consultation in the Section of the Americas. I am not primarily an academic; I am a religious practitioner. But I really enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on our practice, and to prepare the original presentation with a non-Quaker audience in mind. Also, I am not an activist, for anything but Quakerism as a whole.

Third, it is important to state that I believe God is already calling people to be Quakers. Or, perhaps, God is still calling people to be Quakers. The real question is, 'Are our local meetings what people need'? I do not pretend to know how God operates in the hearts, minds, and souls of human beings. What I do know is that every day, people read or hear about Quakers for the first time and think, 'Oh, I'm a Quaker'! I know this because they write to the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) on Facebook or they call my (former) office or they show up at my Quaker meetings, whether in Philadelphia or San Francisco, for the first time. In my personal observation, every one of these seekers is looking for some combination of theology and covered dishes.

¹ Evangelical Friends Church – Mid America Yearly Meeting, Faith and Practice: the book of discipline, Wichita, Kansas.: Friends Ministry Center, 2021, p. 4, <https://efcmaym.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/EFC-MAYM-2021-Faith-and-Practice-Proposed-Version.pdf>, 15 September 2025.

By theology, here I mean some belief system about spiritual things that reflects what they already believe or want to believe. If they weren't looking for something with religious content, they wouldn't have come to a Quaker meeting. There are other places to find people who care passionately about peace or the environment, if that is all you are looking for.

By covered dishes, I mean a community of people who will bring something to share to a potluck meal at meeting, or who will bring you a casserole when you have a baby or you have surgery. In our culture, that role is often filled by religious community, especially when so many of us live far away from our aunts or cousins or siblings. Covered dishes are only one example, but in the United States today, being community for each other is already a form of vital social action.

Different people are looking for a different balance of these; some people care more about one or the other, but they all need some degree of both.

To engage in Quaker social action, there have to be some Quakers. This means that Quaker social action starts at the local meeting, which must be the spiritual ground of Quaker action. A thriving local meeting requires care and attention. Over the last few years among Friends, I have heard a lot of talk about outreach, but I wonder: are we serving the people who are here already? I'm not sure we are.

Quakers need to acknowledge more openly that our continued survival as a denomination is not dependent on our birth rate. Both in my meetings in San Francisco and in Philadelphia, the majority of Friends came to be Quakers as adults, myself included. I would like to see statistics on the percentage of 'convinced' vs. 'birthright' Friends, compared to, say, Catholics or Presbyterians or Nazarenes or Jews. The numbers of Quakers are too often not large enough to be statistically significant compared to these other faith groups and we don't have good statistics among ourselves, but it would be ripe for study.

One of our keys to survival is being visible to the people who are looking for something like Quakerism. A Friend once said to me, in every thousand people there are six latent Quakers. This can be backed up by the high percentage of people who find out their beliefs match Quakerism according to the online religion quiz, Belief-O-Matic.² The problem is, they don't know it and we don't know who they are.

So, what do we do? How are we the Quakers the world needs now? How are we creating the Quakers the world needs to come? We need to engage in religious education

² Take the quiz here: <https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/quizzes/beliefomatic.aspx>. Martin Kelley wrote about this phenomenon here: Martin Kelley, 'Who Tells Our Story?' *Quaker Ranter*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.quakerranter.org/who-tells-our-story/>.

for all ages — for everyone who is exploring the Quaker way. I have some suggestions for Friends, which I will first list and then describe below:

1. Spiritual formation comes from doing the work
2. Reflection on our practice informs our practice
3. We need rhythms of rest and re-creation
4. Know that you are not alone

1. Spiritual formation comes from doing the work

The book of James in the Bible says, ‘Real religion is to reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight and guard against corruption from the godless world’ (Jas. 1:27, *The Message*). Because being a Quaker is more of a practical craft than a matter of doctrine or an academic subject,³ becoming a Quaker comes from apprenticeship in doing real service and from being in worship together. We have to practise doing Quakerism to get it. Quaker meetings need to organise themselves to offer their members real work experience. These experiences might include:

- Visiting members of meeting when they are in the hospital
- Organising meals for families with new babies
- Setting up chairs for worship and thinking about what room layout works best

These activities are all part of Quaker religious education. They build the spiritual and community-oriented thoughtfulness muscles we all need. Real spiritual formation comes from real work, whether that work looks more ‘spiritual’ or more ‘practical’. Some of these ‘real work experiences’ may be formal, such as serving on a committee or signing up to perform a task such as greeting newcomers or cleaning up the kitchen, while others may be informal: newer people can feel included and begin learning when a Friend asks for their help setting up or helping recruit people to offer meals for families with new babies.

Being in worship — those hours on the benches — this is also a necessary part of formation in being a Quaker. It doesn’t matter to me which kind of Quaker worship you practise — that is a matter of personal taste and local custom. No amount of Sunday school, or reading about worship and prayer, can replace the actual practice. It isn’t easy, but it is what works. Real formation comes from real work.

³ Mohr, R.E.R., ‘Quakercraft: becoming the Quakers the world needs,’ excerpts from a presentation by the author to North Pacific Yearly Meeting, 16 July 2015, Whitworth University, Spokane, Washington. *Western Friend* (September 2015), <https://westernfriend.org/magazine/on-play/quakercraft-becoming-the-quakers-the-world-needs/>.

You may have heard the saying, ‘Live up to the Light that you have and more will be granted thee’.⁴ We need to live up to the Light we already have.

A few years ago, Carl Magruder from Pacific Yearly Meeting gave a talk about Earthcare at Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting. It was not published afterwards, but what I remember most from his speech is that he pointed out that Quakers are a people in pain. We know a lot about how we need to be changing, how our economy, our environmental practices, our forms of living need to change. We hurt because we don’t do as well as we know. Compact fluorescent lightbulbs and Priuses aren’t enough. Our own hypocrisy is causing us so much pain that we are unable to respond effectively to other people’s needs. We have to live up to the Light we already have.

It’s not that we don’t know what to do. It’s that what we need to do would be hard, and we don’t think we can do it. It’s like when G. K. Chesterton wrote in 1910, ‘The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried’.⁵ Are we living up to the Light that we have been given? Are we becoming the Quakers the world needs?

There are a few people who have a leading to do work halfway across the world. But for Quakers today, especially if you can’t do everything you used to do or aspire to do, I suggest focussing very locally: local politics, local environmental issues, local economy, local education, local racial justice, building local community in and around your meetinghouse. This will make the most impact on the world. By being the Quakers that our families need, that our churches need, that our neighbourhoods need — those are the Quakers the world needs.

This is also key to outreach to the likely audience for our meetings. Being visible at the school board meeting or community event is one way to prevent people from saying, ‘I thought Quakers were all dead’.

I repeat: spiritual formation comes from doing the work.

2. Reflection on our practice informs our practice

If we are practising our Quaker skills, then reading Quaker materials is also useful. Reading Quaker materials at home, online, from the meeting library — these can all help us discern our vocation and to learn what others have already learned and written about — what is hard, what helps, how to take it into daily life. We have lots of resources nowadays. Books and podcasts and magazines and blogs all give us access to a wider

⁴ Fox, C., *Memories of old friends*, ed H N Pym, 3rd edn, 1882, vol 1, p xxii (entry for 1841), quoted in *Quaker Faith and Practice of Britain Yearly Meeting*, Fifth edition, <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/26-04/>.

⁵ Chesterton, G.K., *What’s Wrong with the World*, Kindle edition 2012 [1910], p. 25.

conversation on how to be a Quaker — with Friends who went before us, and with fellow practitioners today who don't live nearby.

Discussing what you've read with Friends, either in a local small group or an online community, will help broaden your knowledge of what is available, help you sift through the information overload, and help you incorporate that learning into your own practice. We need to talk about our Quaker practice: in small groups, over coffee after worship, or with a friend you go to the movies with.

The Thursday night study group in my longtime community of San Francisco Monthly Meeting made a huge impact on my spiritual life, some from the Quaker books we read, but mostly from the engagement with other practising Friends. Even if it's a really small group, studying together is good for the individual and it is good for the community to nurture these relationships between books and Friends.

Reflecting on our practice doesn't only come from reading. Some of it comes from prayer and time in meeting for worship. What is God asking of us in worship? Am I feeling a nudge to spend more time in prayer? Or to be on time for worship more often? Hold your own practice in the Light during worship and listen for what God might have to say to you about it.

Some reflection comes from formal or informal eldering relationships. I have benefited from eldering received and pondered. Some people have a gift for speaking a word in season, for suggesting a pamphlet to read, for encouraging a timid start, or noticing a tension, or calming an impatient spirit. Friends also have tools such as meetings for clearness or anchor committees to support one another as we reflect and listen to God about personal decisions or ministry leadings. Gentle and honest conversation about our practice holds the potential of leading us directly to our Inner Teacher. Reflecting on our practice improves our practice.

3. We need rhythms of rest and re-creation

In our spiritual lives, like anything else, we need to have exciting experiences and we need to set up the chore charts and pay the bills. The view from the spiritual 'mountain top' comes after a long climb up and before a long climb down, with each step representing a small practice, backed by planning and taking care of practical matters. As a community, we need to receive the gift of enthusiasm from people who have been to the mountaintop and have come back with new stories and new visions that we haven't seen. Every community needs regular infusions of excitement that re-create our sense of urgency and commitment. But if adrenaline becomes a steady drip without

which the group refuses to function, that's not healthy either. We need rhythms of rest and re-creation.

We also have to balance family commitments, ministry leadings, and ways we earn a pay cheque in different proportions at different times in our lives. Sometimes they overlap, and sometimes they don't. This is similar to how sometimes being a mother is a completely fulfilling ministry, and sometimes it's just doing the laundry. Sometimes we get paid for doing God's work, and sometimes we have to find the opportunities to pay attention to God as best we can in whatever work we can get paid for in order to pay the rent or the college tuition. Not everyone in our meetings may earn a living wage, and finding time to volunteer in one's meeting may not be doable for everyone. Our meetings can be attentive to this, offering permission and spaces in which people can practise rest, slowing down, and just being present together. We need those rhythms of rest AND re-creation.

4. Know that you are not alone

Many Quaker groups are relatively small and perhaps geographically distant from other Friends, so it can be challenging to take action on some of the things we care about, particularly on large issues, or on niche issues no one else in our meeting feels particularly called to. It can be important to make connections across Friends meetings so that we know we are not alone, and to multiply our small efforts through knowing others are taking similar action.

As I mentioned above, I have recently completed over a decade of working with FWCC Section of the Americas. One of the major purposes of FWCC is to help Friends to find others who care about what they care about. FWCC is an association of Quaker regional bodies, which we call yearly meetings, across all the branches of Friends, from Evangelical to Holiness to Conservative to liberal and unprogrammed. FWCC does not advocate specific policies or actions. This global network organises opportunities to practise talking with other kinds of Friends. We build on-ramps to societal conversations and channels where people meet. The Friends World Committee is not a social action agency; instead, its purpose is to build up the family of Quakers so they can go out and be the Quakers the world needs. Getting involved in FWCC is one way to connect with Friends, to learn from them about what actions they are taking or where they're feeling led, and to reflect together on what it looks like to be the Quakers the world needs in this time.

In conclusion: How do we become the Quakers the world needs?

We have considered these four ways to help ourselves and one another become the Quakers the world needs:

1. Spiritual formation comes from doing the work
2. Reflection on our practice improves our practice
3. We need rhythms of rest and re-creation
4. Know that they are not alone.

We can become the Quakers the world needs through practising Quakerism through theology and covered dishes—through spiritual and practical actions each day, inside and outside our meetings. We can grow in spiritual formation through exercising our muscles of care for each other in large and small ways, through listening, learning, and reflecting together, and through creating space and permission for rest and re-creation. As we practise the rhythms of being Quakers in our local settings, we can also join together in larger groups to speak out and embody peace and justice and to build strong spiritual communities that resist injustices in our time.

To the Friends who are reading today, I say, we are all called to be the Quakers the world needs.

To all of you, I say, may God bless you in your continued search for the spiritual ground of Quaker social action.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

