



## Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *of the Religious Society of Friends*

# Friends Witness in the World

## Friends and Peace

Since all human beings are children of God, Friends are called to love and respect all persons and to overcome evil with good. Friends strive to have our words and lives stand as a positive witness in a world torn by strife and violence.

The Religious Society of Friends has consistently held that war is contrary to the Spirit of Christ, as stated in the Declaration to King Charles II made by English Friends in 1660:

*Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace, and ensue it, and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all. All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings (sic) with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence (sic) whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world. That spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil,*

*and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.*

*And as for the kingdoms of this world, we cannot covet them, much less can we fight for them, but we do earnestly desire and wait, that by the word of God's power and its effectual operation in the hearts of men the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of the Lord and of his Christ, that he might rule and reign in men by his spirit and truth, that thereby all people, out of all different judgments and professions might be brought into love and unity with God and one with another, and that they might all come to witness the prophet's words, who said, 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'. (Is 2:4; Mic 4:3)*

— *Declaration to King Charles II, 1660*

Friends know that this historic testimony has become a living testimony as we work to give concrete expression to ideals that often are in opposition to prevailing opinion. The peace testimony is closely linked to the basic Friends commitment to honor that of God in every person, so as to avoid not only physical violence but also psychological, economic or systemic forms of coercion. At the same time, we acknowledge that conflict can be an opportunity to lovingly engage those with whom we disagree and that love can often be expressed to resolve disagreement in creative, nonviolent ways. When we encounter people whose views profoundly differ from our own, we can also manifest that love by affirming the sincerity with which they hold those views, while forthrightly expressing our own convictions.

As we reflect further on the sources of violence and war, we may be led to consider seriously our employment, our investments, our purchases, our payment of taxes, and our manner of living. These choices may be a source of harm to others, whether overtly or in the covert forms inherent to some long-established social practices and institutions.

Friends support those who refuse to cooperate with military conscription as well as those who perform alternative service as conscientious objectors. While counseling against military service, we hold in love our members who feel they must undertake it.

We work as we are able to alleviate the suffering caused by war. While military responses in some situations may seem to offer relief of suffering, we are convinced that the real answer lies in the increased capacity to meet human needs and address conflicts before war begins, through diplomacy and humanitarian missions.

We strive to refrain from participating in all forms of violence and oppression while supporting efforts to secure international agreements for the reduction and elimination of armaments and to remove the domination of militarism in our society. We work with others, in our individual lives and in our institutions, to apply proven techniques for the nonviolent resolution and transformation of conflict. We support programs that convert facilities built for war to peaceful uses. We apply our gifts—of spirit, of intellect, of time and energy—to work for an international order that cares for human needs and the earth's resources.

Friends are not opposed to all forms of physical force. For instance, it is sometimes necessary and proper for peace officers to use minimal forms of physical restraint in dealing with persons who do injury to others or who will

not cooperate with just law. Friends do oppose the use of either physical or psychological violence in maintaining public order.

## **Responsibilities of Citizenship**

Friends recognize that the state is a necessary instrument for meeting human needs and for maintaining an orderly society with justice under law for all. As part of our witness to bring about such a society, Friends participate actively in public life. As citizens, Friends bear witness by demonstrating respect for others while faithfully pursuing our leadings. From our earliest days Friends have counseled obedience to the state except when the law or ruling involved appears contrary to divine leading.

In that case, Friends test any proposed action by seeking clearness and support from the meeting. When Friends decide to disobey the law in accordance with divine leading, it is expected that they will act openly and make clear to the authorities the spiritual grounds of their action. If the decision leads to legal penalties, Friends generally suffer willingly. Friends not personally involved in such actions can strengthen the meeting community by supporting fellow members with spiritual encouragement and, when necessary, with material aid.

In public office, Friends have an opportunity to bear witness to the power which integrity, courage, respect for others, and careful attention to different points of view can exert in creating a just community. If a Friend encounters a conflict between faithfulness to God and an apparent duty as a public official, a prayerful search for divine guidance may lead either to a suitable resolution of the conflict or to a decision to resign.

## **Sustainable Stewardship of the Earth and Resources**

All that we have in ourselves and our possessions are gifts from God entrusted to us for our responsible use. Jesus reminds us that we must not lay-up earthly treasures for ourselves, “for where your treasures are, there will your hearts be also” (Matthew 6:21). We cannot serve both God and material wealth. (Matthew 6:24). To be good stewards in God’s world calls us to examine and consider the ways in which our testimonies for peace, equality and simplicity interact to guide our relationships with all life.

*O that we who declare against wars, and acknowledge our trust to be in God only, may walk in the light, and thereby examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates! May we look upon our treasures, the furniture of our houses, and our garments and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions.*

— John Woolman, c. 1770

In today’s world of economic interactions that are far more complex than when John Woolman lived, Friends are challenged to examine their decisions about money and other resources to see whether they contain not only the seeds of war, but also of self-indulgence, injustice and ecological disaster. Good stewardship of economic resources consists both in avoiding these evils and acting to advance peace, simple living, justice and a healthy ecosystem. Good stewardship also requires attention to the needs of organizations that advance Friends values, including our own meetings.

## **Right Sharing**

A life that testifies to the value of economic equality depends on a commitment to share the world’s resources. Friends in comfortable circumstances are encouraged to find practical applications of the testimonies of simplicity and equality in their earning and their spending, as they

consider for their own lives the meaning of economic equality and simplicity. As they ask what level of income is sufficient for their needs, they might also ask what portion of their income could be shared beyond the immediate family. That decision requires balancing the social value of self-sufficiency with the social value of providing help for those in need. It also requires decisions about which expenditures are essential and which are discretionary, and about the values that underlie discretionary spending.

### **Walking Gently on the Earth**

The well-being of the earth is a fundamental spiritual concern. Many have linked the wonders of nature with the Divine. How we treat the earth and its creatures is a basic part of our relationship with God. Our planet as a whole requires our responsible attention.

As Friends have become aware of the interconnectedness of all life on this planet and the devastation caused by neglect or destruction of any part of it, we have become more willing to extend our sense of community to encompass all living things. Today, we see that instead of acting as good stewards of the natural world, humans have been a major threat to the ecosystem.

Friends feel deeply the call to walk gently on the earth. Living in right relationship with the natural world requires continuing attention to wasteful and extravagant consumption as a major cause of environmental destruction. The right sharing of the world's finite resources requires all nations to reduce their present levels of consumption in order that the needs of people in underdeveloped nations be met and the earth's life-sustaining systems restored. The world cannot tolerate the present rate of consumption.

As Friends pay attention to a Spirit-led, right relationship with the earth and its resources, we seek to become models and patterns of simple living and concern for our earth. Though some find it difficult to change their way of life, others make choices that avoid straining the world's resources of clean air, water, soil and energy. Simple living inspires us to choose energy options and practices that reduce our use of energy sources that damage our environment. We are called to challenge the forces driving us toward environmental destruction with the same passion and commitment that we challenge the forces of war.

### **Friends and Equality**

Friends believe there is that of God in every person, and that all people are equal before God. Friends pioneered in recognizing the gifts and rights of women. Women were ministers and leaders of the early meetings. Friends came more slowly to recognize the evil of slavery and of discrimination, and have often been guilty of sharing the prejudices of the broader society. In recent years, Friends have taken stands against discrimination based on sexual orientation and other forms of oppression to which they had earlier been insensitive. An element of that insensitivity is a failure to recognize the privileged status many American Friends enjoy. As Friends examine our own attitudes and practices, we increasingly realize that the challenges of achieving equality in the Religious Society of Friends demand a commitment to overcome all remaining vestiges of inequality and injustice both in our faith community and in the larger society.

Friends affirmation of the principle of human equality in the sight of God is important and necessary, but not sufficient. Friends must seek to identify those structures, institutions, language, and thought processes that overtly and more subtly support discrimination and exploitation, and then work to overcome them. Friends often work with victimized and exploited groups,

including support for the nonviolent efforts of the exploited to achieve self-determination. Friends realize that exploitation impairs the human quality of the exploiter as well as of the exploited, and must work with both groups.

## **Friends and Criminal Justice**

Many early Friends were persecuted and even imprisoned for worshipping as Friends. That experience propelled Friends to work in prisons, ministering to the spiritual and material needs of inmates, as well as actively seeking ways to reform our system of criminal justice. Believing that the penal system often reflects structural and systemic injustice in our society, Friends seek alternatives to incarceration and work to reduce the construction and use of prisons. Friends believe that redemption and restorative justice, not punishment and retribution, are the essential elements of a reformed criminal justice system.

Seeking to heal the wounds of harmful actions, Friends are called to many different kinds of service in the criminal justice system. Friends are active in prison visitation, in the campaign to abolish capital punishment, and in programs that work with victims, offenders, and law enforcement officers in order to restore the victim, the offender, and the community. The healing love and trust in divine leading that such disciplined service requires can greatly assist the rebuilding of broken lives and communities.