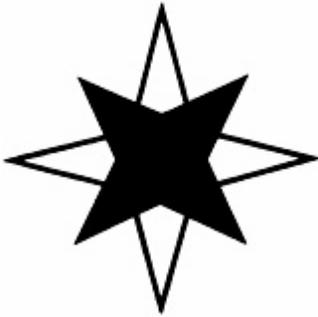


The American Friends Service Committee

1947

“The Quakers have shown us that it is possible to translate into action what lies deep in the hearts of many: compassion for others and the desire to help them - that rich expression of the sympathy between all men, regardless of nationality or race, which, transformed into deeds, must form the basis for lasting peace. For this reason alone the Quakers deserve to receive the Nobel Peace Prize today.”



The Nobel Prize for Peace recognizes many ways of securing and maintaining peace. Diplomats, soldiers, clergy, heads of state, relief organizations, and many others have been awarded for their work in the service of peace. But the American Friends Service Committee (along with its British counterpart and co-laureate, the Friends Service Council) is a unique body in both dedication and longevity. The AFSC, an organization formed by the **Quakers**, represents an absolute and unyielding commitment to pacifism and selfless service to those ravaged by war. Their dedication has never wavered, despite imprisonment, humiliation, and government harassment that continues today, in the form of espionage against Quaker peace activists by local and federal authorities.

The Quakers are also known as the Society of Friends, and were founded in the middle of the 17th century. The first Quakers were Christians who felt that the established forms of Christianity at the time did not suit them.

George Fox was a preacher who many see as the founder of the movement. He preached that spiritual inspiration did not primarily come through church authorities or even the Bible. Instead, Fox and other Quaker preachers believed that Christ touches an individual directly, from within. This focus on an “inner light” that required no outside authority was seen as blasphemy by established Christian churches, and many Quakers were imprisoned, beaten, banished, and as in the case of Mary Dyer in colonial Boston, executed for their beliefs.

Still, the Quakers survived in Great Britain. While never a large denomination, there are now Friends churches in Kenya, Central and South America, and the United States. American Quakers communities are

17th Century-Present

- **William Penn founded a colony for persecuted Quakers to practice their religion safely. This area is now the state of Pennsylvania.**
- **The Society of Friends is known as a “peace church” along with other Christian groups including the Mennonites, Amish, Church of the Brethren, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.**

“The spirit alone gives victory.”

-Arnulf Overland

well known in Pennsylvania, Green Leaf, Idaho, Greensboro, North Carolina and Newburg, Oregon, the site of George Fox College.

Quakers have very little hierarchy, and even their beliefs tend to be diverse from group to group. However, there are some stated beliefs (known as “testimonies”) that Quakers share. They include:

- **Peace:** the belief that violence in all of its forms is wrong, including military service. To offer one’s life for a country is considered a form of idolatry, or revering something above God.
- **Equality:** the belief that all people are worthy of equally humane treatment, including women, prisoners, ethnic or religious minorities, the mentally ill, gays and lesbians, etc.
- **Integrity:** the belief that no one and nothing but God must occupy the center of one’s life, including self, possessions, traditions, regard for others, or anything else.
- **Simplicity:** the belief that one should possess only that which is truly necessary to survive, including clothing, furnishings, and even speech.

These beliefs were put to the test by issues such as slavery, imperialism, women’s rights, and warfare. The last issue in particular gave rise to the organizations in the US and Great Britain that the Peace Prize committee honored in 1947.

In 1917 the First World War had been raging in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa for three years. With the **advent** of modern, industrial technology during the previous half-century, warfare had become mechanized. Machine guns, tanks and chemical weapons were being used for the first time, and the effects were so devastating that each side lost thousands in battles that produced no victor.

As the United States entered the conflict, groups such as the Quakers organized to find nonviolent means of helping the war’s victims. They reached out to other **conscientious objectors** with the idea of love as a means of relieving suffering. This basic belief, that the power of love can “take away the occasion for all wars,” has found adherents in the Quakers and like-minded people ever since. It was this belief that started the American Friends Service Committee.

Their first outreach was to France, the bloody battleground where both sides had been locked in a **stalemate** since early in the war. The AFSC worked with their British counterparts to care for children, repair damaged homes, and provide basic necessities to **refugees**. They also founded a maternity hospital.

When the war finally ended in 1918, the AFSC did not pack up and go home. Instead, they took the opportunity to extend their work into areas where they had been previously unable. In Russia, Serbia, Poland, Austria and Germany, they fought against famine and disease. Eventually, most of the Quakers were able to return home, turning over their

various projects to local organizations or governments. While the Quakers do not **proselytize**, their efforts did result in interest in “Quakerism” in some of the communities where they worked.

The AFSC was able to spend the next few years without major projects, but the 1930s saw them called back into action. The German government under its new chancellor, Adolf Hitler, began to oppress minority ethnic and religious groups. AFSC groups helped these new refugees find a safe haven in other countries. In 1936, civil war erupted in Spain. Quakers provided food to children on both sides of the conflict. And in 1939, war again fell over Europe as Germany invaded Poland, and France and Britain came to her defense.

The AFSC brought comfort and food to refugees in occupied France, as well as helping Londoners make it through the **Blitz**. Unfortunately, the Germans did not allow the Quakers to remain in their occupied territories. They did accept an AFSC mission to Poland, but only on the condition that the Germans be allowed to choose who would receive aid. The AFSC refused, and were not allowed in. The Quakers also worked in the United States, providing relief to Japanese-Americans in internment camps in western states.

Since almost all of Europe had fallen quickly to the Germans, the AFSC could not reach the majority of refugees. They had to wait until the end of the war to engage in reconstruction and relief efforts in Europe. At the same time, they extended their efforts to India, China and Japan. The AFSC was there when India was partitioned, to help resettle Hindu and Muslim refugees who had lost their homes to rioting and **sectarian** violence.

The following years saw no end of conflicts, albeit smaller ones than the world wars. Still, the Quakers had plenty of people who needed help. Arab refugees in the Gaza Strip, civilians on both sides of the Korean War, people fleeing the short-lived Hungarian Revolution, and the victims of war in Algeria were all met with equal compassion and commitment by the Quakers.

In a response to the **Cold War** between the United States and the Soviet Union, the AFSC published a pamphlet in 1955 entitled “Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence.” This publication, which received widespread commentary in the religious and mainstream press, was a shock to some who had previously known the AFSC through its humanitarian works. “Speak Truth to Power” shed light on the commitment of the Quakers, both to nonviolence and to bearing witness to its root causes. Such attention, when aimed at Hitler’s Germany or the Soviet Union, was welcomed by the public. But when the AFLC pointed to the actions of the United States, many people in the government and the public **recoiled**.

In the 1960s, the AFSC was present on both sides of the fighting between the Nigerian government and its province of Biafra, where an independence movement was brutally repressed. The Quakers also went to Vietnam, to care for children and supply prosthetics

to civilians who had lost limbs. They gave medical supplies to civilians in both North and South Vietnam, resulting in a renewed level of anger and suspicion on the part of some Americans, including the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover saw the AFSC and other peace groups as a threat to the nation, and began a program of surveillance, infiltration and harassment that lasted for years.

For many groups seeking to relieve suffering in the world, there is an unspoken rule that “you don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” This unspoken rule is seen as a courtesy toward the government or country where the organization originates, and often helps maintain financial and popular support for their efforts.

The AFSC’s philosophical and religious commitment makes it impossible for them to do so. The United States, like all nations, has its share of problems and injustices. The Quakers have never shied away from seeking to shed light on and put an end to injustice toward Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans, migrant workers, prisoners and the poor. Programs have usually involved helping these groups to organize themselves and take community action for housing, schools, and working conditions that the majority of Americans already enjoy.

Quakers have been at the forefront of the American Civil Rights Movement, the peace movement, campaigns to halt production and deployment of nuclear weapons, to end discrimination based on sexual orientation, and more recently in movements to stop the Iraq war and for immigrants’ rights. The AFSC is also working in partnership with the American Civil Liberties Union to end espionage by local police, the FBI, NSA and military agencies against Americans who criticize the government.

The Quakers have been witness to a great deal of violence and oppression. From the end of the Second World War onward, they began to create programs that not only relieved suffering, but tried to get at its root causes. The disparity between rich and poor, government corruption, and ethnic discrimination were recognized as barriers to lasting peace and security. In response, the AFSC created programs that emphasized technological assistance and social work in Algeria, India, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, Zambia and other nations.

Vocabulary Terms

1. Quaker
2. advent
3. Conscientious Objector
4. stalemate
5. refugees
6. proselytize
7. Blitz
8. sectarian
9. Cold War
10. recoil

Discussion Questions

1. How old is the Society of Friends?
2. Why did the Quakers separate from the established churches of that time?
3. What actions did the Peace Prize committee honor with their award?
4. What are some of the more controversial actions of the AFSC?
5. How has the AFSC come into conflict with governmental authorities?

Introductory and Extended Exercises

A. Before reading the biography, ask students to write a definition of the term “friend.” Ask them to use more than examples, but to actually define the concept. After the reading and study questions, ask them why they think the term “Friends” is used with the Quakers. How does this use compare with their previous definition?

B. Ask students to make a Venn Diagram with “citizen” and “Friend” as the two groups.

C. Ask students to write a newspaper editorial about the AFSC’s refusal to go into Poland because of German restraints on their activities. Regardless of the student’s personal conviction, they are to write a critical or supportive editorial, based on a coin flip or externally generated factor.

Technology Option

See an online exhibit of *Eyes Wide Open*, produced by the AFSC and touring the nation.

Go around the room, making a list of the conflicts that are currently happening in the world. Divide students up into small groups to do a simple summary of the conflict. Have each group go to the AFSC's website at <http://www.afsc.org/> to look for their conflict, and what AFSC is doing about it.

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