

Carrying The Quaker Message Today

Val Ferguson

Address of the General Secretary,
Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC)
March 20, 1987, Annual Meeting, 50th Anniversary of FWCC, Toronto, Canada

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For FWCC, she has represented Friends in a number of ecumenical gatherings, experiences which have provided some of the insights in her address.

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There's a new FWCC leaflet, utilizing a question and answer format, entitled, "What's it All About". The first question is, "Why have a World Committee?" In my first draft I answered, "Learning to transcend our differences is a major task of Friends in FWCC." The draft was circulated for comment.

One Friend suggested, "Surely you could say *something* about learning to rejoice in the richness of variety;" while another said, "Couldn't you say something about the vision of a family with a common experience of God, no matter how that's expressed in the local context?" Well, stuck in the little World Office, in the corner of Drayton House in London, it is easy to think about differences. Sometimes, the only time Friends contact us is when things go wrong! The worse it is, the more you write and the more you telephone. It is easy to be glum at times.

However, we would not be here today, 50 years on, if the story were all melancholy, and the journey all up hill. I *did* add all these positive words, and more, to the leaflet, and I *do* remember that I often rejoice

in carrying the Quaker name today. So, when I was asked if I would speak on the subject of "carrying the Quaker message today", I gladly replied, "Yes." I wanted, I said, to base my message on, "reclaiming our heritage." "Oh dear!," they said, "We want you to talk about today, not the past!"

But what I mean by "reclaiming our heritage," is not an attempt to recreate 17th century Quakerism, but rather, an exploration in the sense of the words of the Conference of European Friends in 1957: "It is for us to penetrate anew the roots of our faith, and draw thence the strength that will issue in a Quaker witness for today, and in words and in actions that will find an echo in the hearts of all."

I have been thinking about these roots of our faith over the last few months, and I have found that I want to share with you a number of somewhat unconnected ideas. I spent an inordinate and unrealistic amount of time trying to manufacture connections between them, until I realized that it would be better not to construct some very clever but very flimsy bridges, but in our Quaker manner to pause □ □ □ after each area I touched upon, allowing time for a brief period of worship and reflection, introduced by some readings which I found helpful in journeying through my ideas. (Note: Pauses are indicated by □ □ □ .)

The first area of "carrying the Quaker message today" that I want to examine is that of carrying our Christian and our universalist heritages. There is no time here to explore the full depth of these two heritages, but we certainly have both, and we can all, no doubt, quote proof texts to bolster our argument, for and against either case. We can cite William Penn, "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion," or Robert Barclay on the subject of, "the Heathens, Turks, Jews, who by the secret touches of the Holy Light in their souls, are enlivened and quickened and thereby secretly united to God." While yet others remind us that it was, "one, even Christ Jesus," who spoke to the condition of George Fox. We can spend hours failing to be about God's business whilst we argue our respective cases. It is not my intention to do this, but rather to share with you some thoughts upon what our dual heritage means for me in terms of "carrying the Quaker message today."

First, I want to see us carrying our heritage right into the heart of the Christian church. I have come to dislike intensely our use of expressions such as "peculiar people" or "Quaker distinctives." These phrases

are used too often as excuses, excuses for standing distanced from the church, distinct from the church, apart from the church, and imparting a general aura of intellectual and moral superiority. I sometimes cringe, as you may find yourselves doing, at those Friends who say, " Oh, Bishop, you *still* have a liturgy, do you?" as though a liturgy is in the nature of a child-like comforter that we are too adult to need.

What we hold, I believe, are not peculiar ideas, but *truths* dimly perceived, but truths that we hold within our Quaker tradition in trust for the whole church.

Many of the ideas we claim to be uniquely Quaker are not unique to Friends, but having said that, we do indeed have special *insights*. We have audacious beliefs about the ability to perceive and follow the will of God, rather than trusting to human majority vote; beliefs about being a community led by God. We have practical experience of the priesthood of all believers and sacramental ministry one to another and to the world around us. We have insights into the baptism of experience of God in our human lives, and what that means in terms of the inseparability of what we believe from who we are and how we act perhaps never more so than in our understanding of the possibility of restored relationships between women and men in today's world.

I believe these are truths with which we, as a people of God, have been entrusted, for the whole church. Now is the time for us to dig deep into our Judeo-Christian roots, to make them our own, and carry them humbly into the 20th Century ecumenical pilgrimage, into the heart of the church which is hungry for what we have to share.

When we do that, we, in turn, will be fed and nourished by the soils in which our sisters and brothers in other Christian traditions have been growing during our years of separation. Indeed we hold truths in trust for the whole church, but let us not forget that we need to learn from others as we travel together. I believe passionately that the ecumenical movement does not belong to us, but to God, and that the church is excitingly open in these days to the possibilities of God's leading. We need to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches in these times and to share with the churches the truths with which our little corner has been entrusted.

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*Oh, God, let me rise to the edges of time and
open my life to your eternity.
let me run to the edges of space and
gaze into your immensity;
let me climb thru the barriers of sound
and pass into your silence;
And then, in stillness and silence
let me adore You,
Who are Life – Light – Love
without begining and without end,
the Source – the Sustainer – the Restorer –
the Purifier – of all that is;
the Lover who has bound earth to heaven
by the beams of a cross*

– extract from Sister Ruth, SLG

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If early Friends sought to call people to the depths of Christian experience, one cannot deny the breadth of the universal experience to which they also called people. Maurice Creasey argues that their belief in the Light, in that of God in everyone, is the only truly distinctive witness of Friends. This Light was for them not some vague “God-like other,” but a divine spark which encompassed all that we know of in *Sophia*, and the *Logos*, the Son of Man, and the historic Jesus, the risen and glorified Christ, the Holy Spirit, and then more – beyond expression – and in every single human being.

I want to probe only two aspects of that universalism which seem to me to be vital in our Quaker message today. First – Friends were finders as well as seekers, and they “spared not tongue nor pen” to share

those findings. I believe we need to remind ourselves *how* they shared those findings: John Woolman, loving to feel where words come from; Mary Fisher, speaking to the Sultan of Turkey about truth at work in all hearts. They were not obsessed by original sin but convinced of original goodness, the original "God-ness" of all to whom they spoke.

Why are some Friends so frightened to share their findings today? I have told many times the story of the Friend I met at a conference who said, "I've been attending Quaker meeting for twenty years, and every time I ask Friends in the meeting what they believe, they give me a book which tells me what someone else believes!" If we reclaim our universalist heritage in our Quaker message today, we shall not fear to share our findings as well as our seekings, because we shall be confident in our sister's original goodness; we shall know, with the psalmist, that "deep calls unto deep" and that when we share our deep experiences of God, we shall be speaking to a God-shaped space in the other.

Others of us forget those universalist insights of our early Friends in a different way, and go, perhaps too eagerly, to our sisters and brothers to share our findings, forgetful of the things of God already in their hearts.

Each one of us has a package of words about religious experience that we reject, perhaps because they have dogmatic overtones or sentimental clutter attached to them. For whatever reason, they are not our personal words about God. We must be *very* sure that we are not, in rejecting language that has no meaning for us, rejecting the people that use that very same language. For many of us, too, there is the need to forge a new language about God, our own language, wrought from our own experience. We must be certain that we are listening to where the words of our neighbors come from and not rejecting our friend because the language is unfamiliar to us. Speaking to that of God in one another is not easy, but even more difficult is listening to that of God in each other. We spend, do we not, too much time not really listening to each other, but as Jo Farrow has said, waiting for a space in what our friend is saying so that we can insert *our* words and *our* experience. Our universalist heritage tells us to listen, so that we can truly hear our neighbor's need, *and* see that it is met!

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*Eternal God, whose image lies in the hearts of all people,
We live among peoples whose ways are different from ours,
whose faiths are foreign to us,
whose tongues are unintelligible to us.
Help us to remember that you love all people with your great love,
that all religion is an attempt to respond to you,
that the yearnings of other hearts are much like our own and are known to you.
Help us to recognize you in the words of truth, the things of beauty, and the actions
of love about us.*

—extract from World Council of Churches, Vancouver Assembly, 1983

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A second aspect of our universalist heritage is that early Friends' conviction concerning the divine light in all spoke to them of the love of God for all. It is debatable whether they accepted the equality of all claims to truth, but they certainly recognized the love of God for all the claimants. Do not all our testimonies spring from this: The love of God for, and, therefore, the unique importance of, every single, divinely enlightened, human being? That is a universalism we must reclaim and carry boldly today in this age of ever increasing xenophobia and ethnocentricity.

The prayers I am quoting are all in the *Oxford Book of Prayer*. In this compendium of the prayers of many faiths, there is one sentence only from George Fox. It is this: "Oh, Lord, baptize our hearts into a sense of the needs and condition of all." Not for early Friends, and not for me, is there some vague ineffable, purposeless nothingness, called God. Their God, my God, has the calloused hands and the dirty nails of a carpenter and is to be found, where Tagore describes him, "amongst the poorest and the lowliest and the lost" – in that universal place where George Fox was baptized into a sense of the needs and the conditions of all, and where he saw the "infinite love of God and had great openings." When we carry the Quaker message today, we do not go to bring God to the poorest; we go to meet God in their midst.

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*I did not know they were so near; in this house, in this street, in this office; my neighbor,
my colleague, my friend.*

*As soon as I started to open the door I saw them, with outstretched hands, burning eyes, longing
hearts, like beggars on church steps.*

The first ones came in, Lord. There was after all some space in my heart----

But the next ones, Lord, the other men, I had not seen them; they were hidden behind the first ones.

There were more of them, they were wretched; they overpowered me without warning.

We had to crowd in, I had to find room for them.

Now they have come from all over, in successive waves, pushing one another, jostling one another.

*They have come from all over town, from all parts of the country, of the world; numberless,
inexhaustible*

They don't come alone any longer but in groups, bound one to another.

*They come bending under heavy loads; loads of injustice, of resentment and hate, of suffering,
of sin ----*

They drag the world behind them, with everything rusted, twisted, or badly adjusted.

Lord, they hurt me! They are in the way, they are everywhere.

They are too hungry, they are consuming me! ----

Lord, I have lost everything, I don't belong to myself any longer;

There's no more room for me at home.

Don't worry, God says, you have gained all.

While men came in to you,

I, your Father,

I, your God, slipped in among them.

—extract from Michel Quoist, *Prayers for Life*, 1965, Gill & Macmillan, Ltd., Dublin

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"Carrying the Quaker message today" must mean carrying a message about peace, but what message? I hear Friends speaking of *inner peace*, of "living in the life and power which takes away the occasion of war." I hear other Friends speaking of the obscenity of the weapons we are building and our need for action. I see them tearing with their bare hands at these monsters in their lairs, or going to prison rather than paying one penny of taxes towards them. Yet others, in an age when the flame of idealism which built the UN has dwindled to a flicker, work on with diplomats and secretariats to build, however tenuously, some of the structures on which world peace may be based. Other Friends say, "How can you be so obsessed with the deaths which have not occurred in a nuclear war, when tens of thousands die each year from a poverty caused by an injustice in which the rich and powerful in all lands have a share?" "Let me speak for myself," says another, "there is no peace whilst the powerful speak for me."

Surely all this, together, is "carrying the Quaker message today?" Yes – yet when I look at the Religious Society of Friends today around the world I do not often see a powerful Quaker message about peace; too often I sense a divided and a divisive society. I see Quakers who march for peace and yet whose personal relationships bear the marks of violence; I see Quakers who pray for peace and yet seem violent in their attitude to those who will not pay for war; I see those who seek an inward peace but will not take with any seriousness, the tenacity and depth of violence in the structures of society – or who will neither speak nor act at the right time for fear of making a mistake or doing some harm. We talk of "speaking the truth in love," yet too often we use tactless, insensitive words which may be as divorced from love as the actions to which they are addressed. Often all these contradictions are present in one individual. I know they are in me! Too often, they are seen in our meetings and our yearly meetings as well.

"Whosoever desires to see this lovely state, the peaceable kingdom, brought forth in the general," says Penington, "must cherish it in the particular." That, surely, is where we must begin. Dan Seeger has written in a recent booklet, "Condemnation has no part in a truly peaceable outlook." Yet, if Quakers are not heaping condemnation on each other, then we are to be found heaping it on the military industrial complex, or we are raging against white South Africans, Libyans, multi-national companies, leftists, rightists, centrists; there is no end to our condemnation. "That of God in everyone, except . . .," and we *all* have our exceptions. How do we combine our proper indignation at systems and attitudes we perceive to be oppres-

sive and destructive whilst remembering that their perpetrators are divinely illumined children of God? We seem somehow to fear that loving the sinner may weaken our hatred of the sin.

There are questions to those of us who carry the Quaker message of the peace testimony today – questions the pain of which should make our testimony almost intolerable to bear; questions being put to us by other churches; questions being asked of us by the poor and by the oppressed. “Is it your own self-interest,” they say, “which governs your actions, or Jesus’ real concern for the poor?” “Are you more concerned with your own good consciences than the good of the oppressed?” “In adhering to your absolute principle of non-violence, are you giving the means, nonviolence, priority over the end, the justice for which the poor and the oppressed are crying?”

These are the questions which the historic peace churches are being asked today. And I can only bear to look at them if I try to explore the depth, the power, and the life of our peace testimony. Our peace testimony is about *shalom*, *eirene*, wholeness, completeness, unbrokenness, healing, health, well-being. That is *shalom*. *Shalom* relates to the community and to the individual. Between people it means trust, openness, and caring, and in groups it means justice and an end to exploitation. “Justice shall go in front of him and the path before his feet shall be peace.” “*Shalom* has to do with order, “Not,” says Fred Kaan, “with law and order, but with love and order.” Fred Kaan, who was formerly on the staff of the World Council of Churches, goes on to say *shalom* and God’s covenant are closely bound together. Says Paul to the Corinthians, “The God who inspires the prophets is not a God of disorder, but of peace.” “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,” says the psalmist. “Peace be within your ramparts and prosperity in your palaces.” *Shalom* is earthbound, city-centered, people-oriented. Peace has to do with activity and with engaging in that activity together. “Beating your swords into ploughshares symbolizes that you have understood that.”

How shall each of us know what earthbound, city-centered, people-oriented activities are to be ours? We so often quote Isaac Penington, “Our life is love and peace and tenderness . . . and helping one another up with the tender hand.” We do not often quote the words that follow: “Oh, wait, wait to feel this spirit, to be guided, to be guided to walk in this spirit.” We must “wait, wait,” he said, “to possess inwardly that which we profess outwardly.”

Wait, wait! *Then* we will find the Quaker message today about *shalom*. We will find that we will not primarily be concerned, for example, with alternative systems of security, but with the *source* of security. We will not primarily be concerned with nonviolent techniques but with nonviolent being. Then our actions – on security or non-violence or taxation – will flow as the scent of the rose in the breeze and with as sweet a savour. To quote Dan Seeger again, “Our actions will simply be an inner condition made visible.”

Our primary concern will not be with results but with faithfulness, because we know that the triumph of God comes not through assurance of survival but through resurrection – and shalom is not ultimately our achievement, but the gift of God.

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Let me hear the words of the Lord; are they not words of peace, peace to his people and to his loyal servants, and to all who turn and trust in Him?

Deliverance is near to those who worship Him, so that glory may dwell in our land.

Mercy and truth are met together; justice and peace have kissed each other; truth shall spring out of the earth and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

Yea, the Lord shall give that which is good and our land shall yield her increase.

Justice shall go before him and shall set us in the way of His steps.

–from Psalm 85 (various translations)

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Finally then, who *are* these Quakers today carrying this Christian and universalist message of *shalom*?

Some twenty years ago Colin Morris wrote a book entitled, *Unyoung, Uncoloured and Unpoor*. Perhaps that was a pretty accurate description of Friends not so long ago, “unyoung, uncoloured and unpoor.”

No more! We certainly know that *young Friends carry the message today*. There can surely be few of us here who have not been touched deeply, one way or another, by the World Gathering of Young Friends.

And sharing the Quaker message today does not mean sharing it in English. It means carrying it in French, from Burundi Yearly Meeting to Madagascar. Or standing in Kenya, telling of your faith as a Bolivian Friend in Aymara to be translated into Spanish and then into English and then whispered into Luragoli for the old Friend in the back row! Those who carry the Quaker message today are *not only those* who worry about whether sanctions against South Africa are right or wrong. Quakers today *are* the victims of violence and racism in Soweto. *Quakers today are not simply watching pictures of famine on their televisions; they are farming the inhospitable altiplano in Bolivia; they are facing drought in Turkana.*

We are young, we are people of colour, and we are poor; therein lies our strength and our future. My prayer for this our fiftieth anniversary is that on our hundredth anniversary when they look back, we will be seen as having come alive to our wholeness at this time. Learning from one another; ministering to one another; strengthening one another, so that we can carry our Christian and our universalist message of *shalom*, wholeness, by our wholeness, into the whole world, for its healing.



*Oh bless this people, Lord, who seek their own face
under the mask and can hardly recognize it . . .
Oh bless this people that breaks its bonds . . .
And with them, all the peoples of Europe,
All the peoples of Asia,
All the peoples of Africa,
All the peoples of America,
Who sweat blood and sufferings.
And see, in the midst of these millions of waves
The sea swell of the heads of my people
And grant to them warm hands that they may clasp
The earth in a girdle of hands,
Beneath the rainbow of your peace.*

—Leopold Sedar Senghor

"Prayer for Peace" Part V, abridged. from *Selected Poems of Leopold Sedar Senghor*
Translation 1964, Oxford University Press; Editions du Seuil 1948



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