

# The PLAIN AND SIMPLE PRESS RELEASE

*prepared by the Purchase Quarter Advancement Committee*

Many of us have met people who have never heard of Quakers, who confuse us with the Shakers, or who otherwise believe we are extinct. Letting people know that Friends are alive and well is an essential first step toward reversing our decline in numbers.

Of course there are many ways to do this. Meetings can improve their signs and make sure they are visible. Those with business phones can be listed in the yellow pages. Our Quarter uses the listing "Churches – Quaker"; we find that the word "Friends" is not as easily understood. Meetings can also take advantage of free religious listings in the local paper. Some towns give each religious organization a free page in the local web site. Hotels and other local and regional organizations often put out directories of houses of worship; Quaker meetings should appear there. A press release is another way to let people know that Friends exist.

At a recent Powell House advancement weekend entitled "Why Can't They Find Us," Friends expressed an interest in news articles about Quakers in our area. They asked for a handout explaining how to create a press release. A member of the Purchase Quarter Advancement Committee agreed to put something together drawing upon our experiences.

For additional information about press releases, we heartily recommend *Letting the Light Shine: A Quaker guide to using the media* by Simon Risley, published by Friends House, London. Although this short book uses some terms unfamiliar to North Americans, it contains sound advice for dealing with print, radio and TV media. The FCG bookstore (1-800-966-4556 or [bookstore@fgcquaker.org](mailto:bookstore@fgcquaker.org)) will be happy to order *Letting the Light Shine* for you.

## When to Use a Press Release

In order to be in the news, Friends must do something newsworthy. This is actually not difficult. When your meeting organizes a vigil, assembles AFSC kits for victims of war, plants sunflower seeds as part of Abolition 2000, or invites victims of nuclear weapons from different parts of the world to speak, it is newsworthy. Major anniversaries are also an appropriate time to issue a press release, particularly when a special celebration is planned. On rare occasion a reporter may take an interest in the local Quaker meeting for its own sake and write a profile.

Activities with a stimulating visual component are most likely to prove attractive to the media. Our Quarter has found that reporters usually will not respond to a press

release about a lecture, no matter how interesting the topic. (In our area it is also difficult to persuade the public to attend lectures and forums). A very famous person or someone connected with a hot media topic may, however, draw the press.

In deciding when to hold a particular event, it can be helpful to consider times when the news is thin and you will be more likely to get your story into the paper. Slow news days include weekends, especially holiday weekends, late summer, and the week after Christmas. It can also be helpful to schedule your event to coincide with another date of interest to the media. In planning a death penalty vigil, a committee set the date for the anniversary of New York State's death penalty statute in order to give the press a peg on which to hang the story.

### **Drafting a Press Release**

Most of the successful press releases in our Quarter were written by Friends with good news to share who are not public relations professionals. Copies of two press releases and the newspaper articles they generated are attached. Both releases followed these basic rules.

At the top of the press release, write:

- § AFor immediate release.®
- § A succinct headline in large type. Make it lively. The headline may convince a busy reporter to read your press release.
- § The name and number of one or two contact people. Include a cell phone number if you have one. Reporters work on deadline; they may drop the story if they cannot reach a contact person. The contact should know the details of the story and be willing to speak to the press. The clerk of the meeting or organizing committee may not necessarily be the best person to do this.

The body of the press release should contain:

- § An opening paragraph with your most important information. Be sure to include the all-important *who, what, when, where* and *why* in this paragraph.
- § A paragraph or two with interesting quotes about your news from one or more group representatives. These quotes might explain the significance of your actions in a local, regional, national or international context, as relevant, or they might provide additional details about the basic facts in your first paragraph.

- § A final paragraph with the least important information in your story. Depending on the situation, you might cite the broader implications of a local or regional event, provide background information about Quakers or another organization involved, or provide an extra quote about the action Friends have taken.

Think of the body of the press release as a miniature news article. Paragraphs should be written in descending order of importance. Some small papers will publish a press release verbatim

instead of sending a reporter to cover the story. If space is a problem, they start cutting at the end of the press release.

Limit the press release to just one page. Under pressure to work quickly, reporters usually do not appreciate long releases. If you would like to give the reporter additional background material, keep it separate from the press release.

Double space the body of the press release.

Write clearly and try, if appropriate, to make the press release lively. Be objective. Focus on the facts of your story. Let the action speak for itself. Avoid adjectives. And be sure to type.

Ask others to read and comment on the draft. A fresh pair of eyes can make invaluable contributions even to the shortest document. The writer should circulate the draft to Friends on the organizing committee and the local advancement committee, if one exists. Readers should take the time to review the draft thoughtfully and carefully.

Thinking critically about a press release pays off. When our committee ran a series of Quaker announcements on public radio in 1998, the radio station offered to write a press release for us. Their draft was certainly well written, but it was mostly about the station. Our committee rewrote the release to focus on Quakers. Short and sweet, that press release (attached) generated long articles about Friends in two large-circulation newspapers.

### **Sending Out a Press Release**

Spend time well in advance of your event to gather a list of local and regional media contacts, including newspapers, radio, and TV stations. Be sure to include media outlets from all sectors of your community. Having labels and fax numbers ready will save time when you have to send out the release during the final stages of preparation for your event. Also, find out the news deadlines. Your press release should arrive in a timely fashion, not during the final flurry of activity just before a publication date. Timing is particularly important for weekly and monthly publications.

Mail the press release if you have time. Otherwise fax is OK. Follow up with a phone call.

Send the press release to as many media outlets as possible. If there is an aspect of your story that will appeal to a particular media outlet, be sure to bring it to their attention by highlighting, underlining, or enclosing a note. When a committee recently organized a news conference which included a prominent African American religious leader, they highlighted that fact when sending the

press release to the local African American paper. The story made the front page.

In our Quarter, the county-wide paper usually declines to cover stories about the activities of a single Quaker meeting. Most town and village papers stick to local news. If a connection

exists between a regional story and a local community, it is advisable to include a note underscoring the connection with the press release for the local paper. Similarly, if you point out the regional or national implications of a story involving a single meeting, the regional paper will be more likely to pick it up.

For a newspaper, send the press release to the city, local or metro news editor. They have different titles at different papers. At radio and TV stations, the press release goes to the news director or assignment editor. If you know which reporter is likely to cover the story, it can be helpful to call him or her directly to create interest in the story. Send the reporter a copy of the press release as well.

Daybook Advisory: If you are in or near a city, you may be covered by an AP bureau that publishes a daybook. This is a listing of events made available to media outlets; for many outlets the daybook is a key source of information. Send a separate release to the attention of the AP daybook editor, or compose a very brief advisory with *who, what, when, where, why* and contact information.

### **Media Contacts**

If possible, get to know the reporters who are likely to be interested in stories about religious or social justice activities. A personal contact can overcome the anonymity of a busy newsroom.

Members of Stamford–Greenwich Meeting recently organized a forum on the death penalty with speaker Toni Bosco of Murder Victims= Families for Reconciliation. Although local newspapers declined to cover the event, all was not lost. A member of the meeting called a radio talk show host whom she knew personally to let him know about Toni. His interest piqued, the talk show host met with Toni and broadcast portions of the interview several times during the week before the forum. Stamford–Greenwich Friends thus promoted their cause of opposition to the death penalty while letting people know that Quakers are alive and active in Stamford.

### **Working Together**

Our committee has found that when several meetings work together on a project, the chances for regional media coverage improve. Recently a regional paper took interest in the fact that meetings from all over our county were involved in a vigil to abolish the death penalty. They gave the story prominent coverage.

### **Quaker Terminology**

Avoid the use of historic Quaker terminology in contacts with the media. We have found that phrases such as *Aquarterly meeting@* or *Amonthly meeting@* are confusing to reporters and others new to Quakers. When a committee prepared a

press release to announce a silent vigil in our

county seat, they referred to the "Quaker Meetings of Westchester County" and listed the locations of the meetings involved, but did not use the words "quarter" or "monthly meeting." Our goal is to have others understand the action we are taking, for example, why we oppose the death penalty. In this context historic Quaker terminology is not relevant and only serves to confuse. Once a reporter interviewing a Friend about a significant witness activity spent precious time trying to understand the distinction between a monthly and a quarterly meeting. He still got it wrong in the article.

### **Photographs**

Newspapers are often happy to receive clearly focused photographs with the press release, and they sometimes run them. Action pictures are particularly welcome.

If a photographer plans to visit your meeting, consider in advance what might or might not make a good picture. Just before our advancement committee ran Quaker announcements on public radio, we distributed a press release about our effort. Papers in two cities picked up the story. Each sent a reporter and a photographer to a local meeting. Friends in these meetings did not want the photographer to take pictures during worship. After the rise of meeting, when most people had left, the photographers finally took pictures of a nearly empty worship room. Although in each case the article about Quakers was wonderful, the accompanying photographs did not convey the energy and vitality of the meetings involved.

### **Children and Dogs**

Attractive visual images can carry the day. A Friend who organized a news conference preceding our Quarter's most recent death penalty vigil offered this comment.

We had some kids with signs they had made themselves, and I put them right down front at the news conference. Sure enough, that was the picture that made the paper and TV. As one of my old producers used to say, "Kids and dogs. You can't go wrong."

A lesson for us all. When Scarsdale Meeting children planted sunflower seeds in support of Abolition 2000, the press was invited. Abolition had distributed paper sunflowers as a way of promoting the event. Although the county paper usually avoids stories about a single meeting, the kids won them over. They ran a picture of the children and their flowers on the front page.

### **Event Listings**

It is not necessary to draft a press release in order to list an event in the newspaper. The tricky thing about free event listings is the requirement of advance notice. In our area the county-wide paper requires at least two weeks= notice. Always check this requirement way beforehand. And don=t forget the AP daybook.

### **A Final Note**

A Friend who is a former reporter advises:

Remember that reporters are people like you, trying to do a job as best they can. Most of them care about getting a story right, and are not trying to trip you up or make you look bad. Most of their mistakes are made because they are in a hurry and don=t understand something. This often happens when they are trying to understand Quakers or Quaker practice.

If you are being interviewed for a newspaper or on tape for radio and TV, you can always start over if you don=t feel you have expressed yourself clearly. Be sure the reporter knows how to reach you later that day if s/he gets back to the office and finds that s/he needs to clarify something.

To raise your level of comfort in dealing with the media, we again recommend *Letting the Light Shine*, written by a Quaker with over 20 years of experience in advertising and public relations. Among the topics: planning events, press releases, talking to reporters, differences between print and electronic media, radio and TV interviews, and advertising.

Let It Shine!

Purchase Quarter Advancement Committee  
Joyce Schroeder, Clerk

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