

# A Sustainable Life



*Quaker Faith and Practice  
in the Renewal of Creation*

by Douglas Gwyn

foreword by Steve Chase

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QuakerPress of Friends General Conference  
1216 Arch Street, 2B  
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Printed in the United States of America

Composition and design by David Botwinik

ISBN 978-1-937768-55-3 (paperback)  
978-1-937768-56-0 (digital)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Gwyn, Douglas, 1948-

Howard and Anna Brinton : re-inventors of Quakerism in the twentieth  
century : an interpretive biography / by Anthony Manousos.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-937768-55-3 – ISBN 978-1-937768-56-0

1. Human ecology—Religious aspects—Society of Friends. 2. Society of  
Friends—Doctrines. 3. Christian life—Quaker authors. I. Title.

BX7731.3.G86 2014

248.4'896—dc23

2014015225

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## CHAPTER 7

*The Lamb's War*

As we have seen repeatedly in these chapters, Quaker faith and practice are energized by a pattern of powerful paradoxes. Peace is no exception. On one hand, there is the sublime peace, a vitalizing harmony that attends our quiet abiding in the divine Presence, as God teaches and heals us through every cell of our bodies. Recall again (from Chapter 2) the counsel of George Fox:

*The first step of peace is to stand still in the light (which discovers things contrary to it) for power and strength to stand against that nature which the light discovers: for here grace grows, here is God alone glorified and exalted, and the unknown truth, unknown to the world, made manifest, which draws up that which lies in prison and refresheth it in time, up to God, out of time, through time.<sup>1</sup>*

Note, however, that “the first step of peace” leads to conflict. First we “stand still” in the light. Then the light reveals things in our lives contrary to its nature. Then the light gives us strength to “stand against” desires, habits and personal investments that are in conflict with the light’s nature – and with our own true nature in the seed of God. Any peace that simply denies or glosses over such conflict is a false peace, what the prophet Isaiah (28:17-18) calls a “refuge of lies,” a “covenant with death.”<sup>2</sup>

Hence, true peace is the hidden sanctuary of individuals and communities willing to face conflict, endure struggle, and choose life over death. As Fox’s counsel suggests, it is a struggle for liberation from captivity to sin and delusion. The liberation is both personal and social. It takes us “up to God, out of time,” but only “in time, through time.” *This peace is not the absence of conflict.* It

is the integrative, covenantal reality implied by the Hebrew word *shalom*: wholeness, communion; a harmonious equilibrium that balances needs and claims among all parties; an intact, orderly rightness of life.<sup>3</sup>

The sustainable life will not be found through a narrow focus on personal habits of consumption or environmental advocacy, to the neglect of work for justice and struggle against militarism, or attention to the life of our meetings. Friends are sometimes at odds over which of these concerns deserves our most urgent attention. Different Friends will prioritize different concerns, often based on their different gifts and abilities. But all these concerns make some claim on us, and hopefully any given meeting community will balance these different emphases among its participants. The integrative *shalom* of true peace is the product of covenant communities.

## The Lamb's War

Early Friends named this paradoxical reality “the Lamb’s War.” It begins within, as one stands still in the light, sees what must change, and begins to follow Christ out of captivity and into freedom. It builds powerful bonds of love and mutual support among those struggling to be faithful in the light together. Individuals not only support one another through personal struggles; they also inspire each other by example and gentle encouragement to a higher attainment. The Lamb’s War thus moves outward to form and continually reform a community of equals.

The covenantal community sees the world around it with new eyes. Social norms and mores that once appeared “natural,” self-evident, or simply unfortunate are revealed in the light to be intolerable travesties of human decency and of God’s good will to all creation. The Lamb’s War is an engagement with norms and institutions that oppress and violate God’s creatures. It is a struggle against spiritual forces that keep men and women locked in alienation from the knowledge and power of God within them. The term “Lamb’s War” derives from Revelation 14:1-5, in which John sees Christ as a lamb standing on Mount Zion (the spiritual mountain Micah saw – see

Chapter 4) with faithful men and women standing together with the lamb. They stand against the violent and alienating powers of the Beast and False Prophet (portrayed in Rev. 13). The early Quaker Lamb's War confronted a variety of social injustices. But it focused primarily against the established Church of England with its monopoly on religion, its power to coerce all to attend, its vast properties, and its enfranchised clergy supported by state-enforced tithes. Early Friends by the thousands nonviolently confronted the state-church alliance that deformed human consciousness by forcing it to conform to creeds and swear oaths of allegiance.

Over the centuries since that first generation, the experience of peace has led Friends into conflict with a variety of social monstrosities. For example, for John Woolman and Levi Coffin (a leader in the Underground Railroad), the pre-eminent monstrosity was the institution of slavery. For Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony, slavery was compounded by patriarchy. For twentieth-century Friends, it has been the massively enfranchised military-industrial complex.

Early Friends began in the North but had soon infiltrated every parish in England, interrupting church services and challenging the authority of the state-enfranchised clergy. They were often attacked by mobs, taken before judges, and thrown in prison. Benjamin Nicholson and two other Quakers imprisoned at York castle published *The Three-Fold Estate of Anti-Christ* (1653), portraying the clergy, legal establishment, and ruling classes as an unholy trinity united against the risen Christ moving among the common people. The same year, Nicholson published *A Blast from the Lord*, inveighing against the social arrogance and wealth of magistrates and others who . . .

*... spend the creatures on your lusts, in glorious apparels, and gold rings, and needless adorning, instead of covering the naked, and feeding the hungry, you set out Laws to punish them: my heart bleeds to think of the hard usage of my poor fellow creatures that have no abiding. . . . You wallow yourselves in the earths treasure like swine in the mire, and never consider that the earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof, and that he hath given it to the sons of men in general, not to*

*a few lofty ones which Lord it over their brethren: and if any poor creature steal a horse, ox, or sheep, he is either put to death, or burned in the hand; but you never consider how many horses, oxen, and sheep you steal from the Lord and use them to satisfy your own wills and lusts.*<sup>4</sup>

John Camm wrote *A Word of the Lord* to Oliver Cromwell in 1654, making the case for disestablishment of the church: “we witness the coming of Christ in his Kingdom, not by might, pomp, glory from without, nor any law . . . our desires were that there should be no Law upon Religion, for it need not one to defend it, for pure religion . . . is to loose the bonds of wickedness, and let the oppressed go free, and take off every yoke.”<sup>5</sup>

The early Quaker Lamb’s War was grounded not only in the deep spiritual baptism of standing still in the light and becoming whole persons – it also derived from the bitter lessons of the English Civil War in the previous decade, which had only succeeded in enfranchising a new set of oppressive elites. George Fox diagnosed the spiritual malaise underlying violence and war. In April 1651, while serving a sentence in Derby for blasphemy, the Parliamentary army tried to recruit him to fight against a royalist uprising:

*My time being nearly out of being committed six months to the House of Correction, they filled the House of Correction with persons that they had taken up to be soldiers: and then they would have me to be a captain of them to go forth to Worcester [to] fight and the soldiers cried they would have none but me. So . . . the Commissioners . . . proffered me that preferment because of my virtue, as they said, with many other compliments, and asked me if I would not take up arms for the Commonwealth against the King. But I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars, and I knew from whence all wars did rise, from the lust according to James’s doctrine [James 4:1]. Still they courted me to accept of their offer and thought that I did but compliment with them. But I told them I was come into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strifes were.*

*And they said they offered it in love and kindness to me because of my virtue, and such like flattering words they used, and I told them if that were their love and kindness I trampled it under my feet. Then their rage got up and they said, "Take him away gaoler, and cast him into the dungeon amongst the rogues and felons"; which they did and put me into the dungeon amongst thirty felons in a lousy, stinking low place in the ground without any bed. Here they kept me a close prisoner almost a year.<sup>6</sup>*

Fox's life in the light, the covenant of peace, had given him insight into the real motives of the Civil War and of all wars, the lust for property and power (excoriated by Nicholson above). Although his political sympathies were decidedly with the Commonwealth, he refused to join its battles, which would only harden power into oppression.

Just a year later, having sparked an explosive Quaker movement in the North, Fox stated the peace principle in positive – but still highly conflictual – terms in an epistle to Friends:

*That which is set up by the sword, is held up by the sword; and that which is set up by spiritual weapons is held up by spiritual weapons, and not by carnal weapons. The peace-maker hath the Kingdom, and is in it; and hath the dominion over the peace-breaker, to calm him in the power of the Lord. And Friends, let the waves [persecution] break over your heads. There is rising a new and living way out of the north, which makes the nations like waters [Rev. 17:15]. The days of virtue, love and peace are come and coming, and the Lamb had and hath the kings of the earth to war withal [i.e., against – see Rev. 17:14] and will overcome with the sword of the Spirit, and the word of his mouth [Rev. 19:21].<sup>7</sup>*

As the citations in this passage indicate, the Book of Revelation was a major source for early Friends. Its message of prophetic resistance to oppressive, idolatrous power helped shape a nonviolent movement that included many men who had fought valiantly for

the Commonwealth in the preceding decade. Their confrontational witness enraged their opponents more often than they calmed them. They were physically attacked or thrown in prison. But their lions-den strategy drew out sympathetic spirits and brought them into the movement, which grew exponentially in these earliest, militant years.

The concept of spiritual weaponry was drawn from the Letter to the Ephesians (6:10-15), which calls early Christians to . . .

*. . . be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you to proclaim the gospel of peace.*

Note the emphasis upon *standing*: “stand against,” “withstand,” “stand firm,” and “stand.” This language partakes of a nonviolent undercurrent in scripture going all the way back to the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites despaired as they stood on the banks of the Red Sea, with Egyptian chariots bearing down on them from behind and deep waters ahead. “But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today, for the Egyptians you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still’” (Exod. 14:13-14).

So George Fox’s counsel to “stand still in the light” is much more than spiritual technique. It is a path of personal transformation, nonviolent conflict, and social liberation. Alienated powers will do most of the moving. The faithful need simply to stand fast in the integrity, equality, community, simplicity, and peace they find

together. Strength will be given. Words will be given as needed. Actions will be led where they are appropriate. Speaking truth to power, we stand with the Lamb, who “will overcome with the sword of the Spirit, and the word of his mouth.”

Ephesians emphasizes that the struggle is not against “blood and flesh” people but against the spiritual forces that control them: “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” New Testament scholar Walter Wink interprets these “powers” as the spirituality, or interiority, of social institutions, structures, and systems. These powers are part of God’s good creation, but have been disordered by forces of delusion and domination.<sup>8</sup> The work of redeemed humanity is to resist disordered powers and to call them back to their places in the many-faceted wisdom of God.

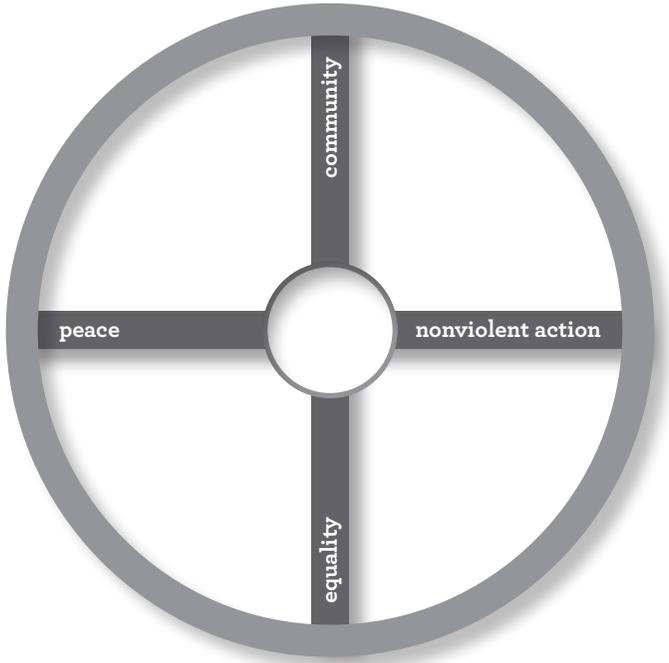
James Nayler was a leading figure in the early Quaker movement. While in prison in 1657, he wrote *The Lamb’s War*, the definitive statement of the movement’s revolutionary struggle. He summarizes the Quaker program:

*Their war is not against Creatures, not with the flesh and blood but spiritual wickedness exalted in the hearts of Men and Women, against the whole Work and Device of the god of this World, Laws, Customs, Fashions, Inventions, this is all Enmity against the Lamb and his followers who are entered into the Covenant which was from the beginning. [The Lamb has come] to take the Government to himself that God alone may wholly rule in the hearts of Men and man live in the Work of God.*<sup>9</sup>

Nayler describes an all-embracing nonviolent cultural revolution. It aims to resist and transform all unjust, oppressive, and violent structures and norms. It wages conflict on behalf of a new order in which “God alone may wholly rule in the hearts of Men and man live in the Work of God.” This is nothing less than a reconciliation of culture and nature, a redemption that brings human life back to earth, back in tune with the wisdom of creation.

## Peace and Justice

The coordinates of the Lamb's war, and the Quaker practice of peace witness generally, may be charted thus:



The experience of peace in personal spiritual practice and in Quaker worship builds an egalitarian community. Empathy grows for one another and for others in society in the consciousness *razing* experience of the light. That is, the light deconstructs and reconstructs the self and the world in one's conscience. One can no longer accept or justify society's violence and injustice as "the way the world works." Individuals and communities of Friends are led into prophetic confrontation and conflict with these deformed powers and with individuals who have been deformed by the powers.

*The vertical axis of equality and community* is like a plumb line in the consciousness of the community that gathers and follows the light together. Community experience tests and grounds our ideals of equality, winnowing out distorted ideas in some cases, challenging us to think and act more radically in other cases. Meanwhile,

our commitment to equality among all kinds of people forces us to keep looking afresh at our community and asking whether it is sound. The prophet Amos waited upon the Lord and was given a vision of a plumb line set amid the people of Israel. It revealed the crookedness of a society that had abridged God's covenant, polarizing between rich and poor, powerful and powerless. Such an unsound edifice must fall (Amos 7:7-9). In a similar vein, Isaiah warned that the Lord "will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet" in judging human society (28:17).

*The horizontal axis of peace and nonviolent action* is a continuum. Personal peace is found only through confronting and standing against one's inner contradictions. Coming more fully into the light, we help one another in that struggle, as fellow "children of the light." Together we take the struggle into wider society. But even in the heat of prophetic confrontation, it is possible to maintain inner peace, equanimity, and compassion. In 1652 George Fox was beaten half unconscious by a mob of Christians near Ulverston. But even in that moment "I was in the love of God to them all." After the beating, "they said if I came into the town again they would kill me. And so I was moved of the Lord to come up again through them."<sup>10</sup>

James Nayler was savagely punished by an act of Parliament in 1656. Still, at the end of his life he was able to witness

*There is a Spirit that I feel, which delights to do no Evil, nor to revenge any Wrong, but delights to endure all things, in Hope to enjoy its own in the end; its hope is to out-live all Wrath and Contention, and to weary out all Exaltation and Cruelty, or whatsoever is of Nature contrary to itself.<sup>11</sup>*

*These two perpendicular axes constitute each other.* The peace of Quaker faith and practice reveals social justice more starkly. Simultaneously, the unmasking of unjust, alienated social relations draws Friends into nonviolent engagement with oppressive, violent persons and powers. This dialectic, taken as a whole, is the meaning of *shalom*, a peace the world cannot give (John 14:17), a peace that surpasses all understanding (Phil. 4:7). Those who pose a choice between working for peace and working for justice don't really understand either.

On the other hand, when Friends simply react in protest to the next war, or simply refuse military service without addressing the exploitative economic system that gives rise to militarism and war, the Quaker “peace testimony” becomes one dimensional and something less than a full testimony to the truth. Furthermore, even to work for both peace and justice is a hollow exercise if we don’t simplify our lives and minimize our participation in an economic system that oppresses others. In Chapter 4, we heard the sobering lament of John Woolman (1764):

*Oh, that we who declare against wars and acknowledge our trust to be in God only, may walk in the Light and therein examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates! May we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses and the garments in which we array ourselves and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in these our possessions or not.*<sup>12</sup>

Hence, simplicity (the aspect of Quaker testimony we will address in the final chapter) is also implied in peace. Indeed, the aim of this book is to show how every aspect of Quaker faith and practice is implicit in every other. Each is integral to the whole, the “seamless garment” of the crucified and risen Christ. Thus, to lift up “peace” as the distinguishing mark of Friends, to the neglect of other integral aspects, is to reify (“thingify”) one part of the whole and to reduce the powerful processes of faith and practice into a static “Quaker philosophy,” and pristine “Quaker values.”

## **The Declaration of 1661**

The first definitive articulation of the Quaker commitment to peace came in an emergency statement published by Fox and a dozen Quaker leaders in London in January 1661. In the aftermath of an armed uprising in London by another radical group, several hundred Friends had been rounded up and imprisoned, to ensure the security of the newly restored monarchy. *A Declaration from the harmless and innocent people of God, called Quakers, against all plotters and fighters in the world* was drafted and rushed into print

to secure the release of imprisoned Friends and make the Quaker position clear to the new government. The document begins:

*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. We know that wars and fightings proceed from the lusts of men (as James 4:1-3), out of which lusts the Lord hath redeemed us, and so out of the occasion of war. The occasion of which war, and war itself (wherein envious men, who are lovers of themselves more than lovers of God, lust, kill and desire to have men's lives or estates) ariseth from lust. All bloody principles and practices we . . . do utterly deny, with all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world.<sup>13</sup>*

The spiritual struggle of the Lamb's war is not denied. The tract goes on to add, "our weapons are spiritual and not carnal, yet mighty through God to the plucking down of the strongholds of Satan, who is the author of wars, fighting, murder, and plots."<sup>14</sup> But the larger agenda of social justice and equality has been attenuated here, in order to emphasize a refusal to participate in violence.

The overall tract is a powerful statement, one of the great peace witnesses in all Christian history. But, with Friends increasingly under persecution from a hostile new regime, the larger social equation of peace was neglected. Friends suffered more than ever, but most often merely for continuing to meet openly for worship, rather than for preaching in the streets, marketplaces, and parish churches, calling people to justice and morality. "The Quaker peace testimony" as we know it came into focus only as the Lamb's War was defeated and Quakers were repressed to become a nonconformist sect, as described in the overview of Quaker history in the preceding chapter.

## **The Development of "the Quaker Peace Testimony"**

William Penn's writings set the pattern for post-revolutionary, early modern Quaker faith and practice in several respects, including

peace. His *Essay towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe* (1693) was a far-sighted proposal for a “Diet” of European states to settle international disputes and establish laws for international conduct. It retained the radical Quaker peaceable kingdom as its standpoint, but it suggested pragmatic ways to limit and de-escalate the protracted crisis of European warfare until that kingdom is realized. Penn pointed out that a different rule holds for “the people of God,” which is “not fighting but suffering.” But he knew that this was not an ethic rulers or the majority of Europeans were ready to accept. His proposals trenchantly prefigured today’s International Court at the Hague and the European Union.<sup>15</sup>

Penn thus established the two-track logic of modern Quaker peacemaking. As *prophets*, Friends maintain the absolute renunciation of violence and are willing to suffer for their nonviolent witness for a peaceful and just world. As *reconcilers*, Friends also meet hostile parties and warring powers where they are and work to find pragmatic alternatives to resolving conflict among them. Different Friends typically have strengths along one track or the other, as radical prophets or negotiating reconcilers. The interplay of these different gifts and callings defines the creative edge of Quaker peacemaking to this day.

In the classic, so-called “quietist” period, the countercultural sectarian impetus of faith and practice led Friends primarily to an ethic of resistance to military service. Some, like John Woolman, also resisted payment of taxes for war. As noted in the preceding chapter, the renunciation of war led Friends to withdraw from colonial leadership in Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War. It also inspired concerted efforts by Friends on both sides of the Atlantic to avert the violence of the American Revolution. Friends also advocated for Native American tribes against the onslaught of European American aggression.

English Friend Jonathan Dymond’s *Inquiry into the Accordancy of War with the Principles of Christianity* (1823)<sup>16</sup> is the first systematic expression of the Quaker peace testimony. It constitutes a pacifist correlate to the drive for doctrinal renewal emerging in the Orthodox and Hicksite movements at that same time. Dymond devotes half of his book to showing the incompatibility of war with

Christian faith. He stresses that pacifism is not only good Christianity but good sense. War is unreasonable and disastrous to human society. He asserts that peace is a practical policy for nations, but he doesn't develop institutional alternatives to war. Peter Brock cites Dymond's book as a seminal influence on the development of the international peace movement in the ensuing decades of the nineteenth century. It brought the Quaker peace testimony out of sectarian seclusion and contributed to wider Christian peace work.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, Friends on both sides of the Atlantic were on the forefront of religious and secular peace societies. A Friends peace conference in Philadelphia in 1900 rehearsed major themes of the century to come. Military-industrial establishments in Europe and America were already casting dark clouds over the future prospects of peace. The Spanish-American War had revealed imperialist tendencies in the United States extending beyond North America. Despite these forebodings, Rufus Jones, the emerging trans-Atlantic leader of liberal-modernist renewal (see the preceding chapter) breathed confidence in the inexorable progress of a Christian civilization. These, of course, were heady days of rapid scientific, technological, and economic advancement.

Two world wars and the rise of a permanent war economy in the United States made peace the perennially pressing concern among Friends. "The peace testimony" became the defining feature of "Quakerism" for many Friends. Peace became the lens through which Friends viewed all concerns. A good specimen statement is found in Britain Yearly Meeting's *Quaker Faith & Practice*:

*The Peace Testimony has been a source of inspiration to Friends through the centuries, for it points to a way of life which embraces all human relationships. . . . In the closing years of the twentieth century, we as Friends face a bewildering array of social and international challenges, which have widened the relevance of the Peace Testimony from the issue of peace and war between states to problems of tensions and conflicts in all their forms.*<sup>18</sup>

Concern for peace has indeed exerted a powerful shaping influence on Quaker witness regarding race relations, civil rights,

economic justice, women's rights, prison reform, international development, interfaith dialogue, earth care, and just about every other area of social action among Friends.

In the preceding chapter, we noted that during the latter twentieth century, the modern Quaker confidence in progress, reckoned from a Christian-European-masculine perspective, was transfigured to become a postmodern faith in processes that foster a shared search for truth among different religious, racial, and gendered perspectives. This perspective offers a healthy critique of all false unities that obliquely establish the dominance of one viewpoint or interest above others. But it also tends to establish a permanent, uneasy rivalry between racial, gender, sexual, religious, and other identities that are never resolved. These jostling identities have tended to enervate the Religious Society of Friends today, weakening wider efforts in outreach and witness.

By contrast, early Friends were united and galvanized into revolutionary action by spiritual formation in *Christ*, whose historic example and spiritual presence through the light within each person's conscience is also *beyond* every personal identity. The living Christ also stands not only beyond every doctrinal formulation, but beyond every abstract ethical value such as "peace." Returning once again to Fox's counsel, "the first step of peace is to stand still in the light." Through that steadfast patience, "the unknown truth, unknown to the world, [is] made manifest, which draws up that which lies in prison and refresheth it in time, up to God, out of time, through time." This is the truth that makes us free (John 8:32). Peace and nonviolent action are the way of that freedom.

## Advices and Queries from Britain Yearly Meeting's *Quaker Faith & Practice*

#31: We are called to live "in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars." Do you faithfully maintain our testimony that war and the preparations for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ? Search out whatever in your own way of life may contain the seeds of war. Stand firm in our testimony, even

when others commit or prepare to commit acts of violence, yet always remember that they too are children of God.

#32: Bring into God's light those emotions, attitudes and prejudices in yourself which lie at the root of destructive conflict, acknowledging your need for forgiveness and grace. In what ways are you involved in the work of reconciliation between individuals, groups and nations?

#33: Are you alert to practices here and throughout the world which discriminate against people on the basis of who or what they are or because of their beliefs? Bear witness to the humanity of all people, including those who break society's conventions or its laws. Try to discern new growing points in social and economic life. Seek to understand the causes of injustice, social unrest and fear. Are you working to bring about a just and compassionate society which allows everyone to develop their capacities and fosters the desire to serve?