

THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE

2002

**TO DO JUSTLY, AND TO LOVE MERCY:
LEARNING FROM QUAKER SERVICE**

Mark Deasey

The James Backhouse Lectures

The lectures were instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) on its establishment in 1964.

They are named after James Backhouse who, with his companion George Washington Walker, visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. They travelled widely, but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through their visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia.

Coming to Australia under a concern for the conditions of convicts, the two men had access to people with authority in the young colonies, and with influence in Britain, both in Parliament and in the social reform movement. In meticulous reports and personal letters, they made practical suggestions and urged legislative action on penal reform, on the rum trade, and on land rights and the treatment of Aborigines.

James Backhouse was a general naturalist and a botanist. He made careful observations and published full accounts of what he saw, in addition to encouraging Friends in the colonies and following the deep concern that had brought him to Australia.

Australian Friends hope that this series of Lectures will bring fresh insights into the Truth, and speak to the needs and aspirations of Australian Quakerism. This particular lecture was delivered in Hobart on 7 January 2002, during the annual meeting of the Society.

Colin Wendell-Smith
Presiding Clerk
Australia Yearly Meeting

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ABOUT THIS LECTURE

If there is an identifiable Quaker approach to service, we could hope that it is embodied in this: that as in worship we follow the leadings of the Spirit and the Light faithfully, we are prepared to be led where it takes us: to let go of comfortable certainties, and to be taken into new knowledge and also through painful and difficult experiences. The journey is not a comfortable one for the most part - it can be terrifying at times, and often leads close to despair. If we accept that there is that of God in everyone, others cannot be objects of charity - we go prepared to encounter their full reality, and to be taught and changed by it. In fact, if we take the word 'charity' at its original meaning, and as it is expounded in the Epistle to the Corinthians, the same is implicit - charity is compassionate, divinely-enabled love, which recognises the divine in the other.

In this Backhouse Lecture Mark Deasey speaks out of the experience of many years work with Quaker Service, in Lebanon and in Cambodia, and since 1993 with Oxfam-Community Aid Abroad.



An assignment of food and bedding from Australia for the Friends' War Victims' Relief Committee's work in hunger-stricken Europe after the First World War - outside the Russell Street Meeting House in Melbourne.

For
Randal Hugh Deasey, 1916- 1996
In grateful memory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Deasey was born in Melbourne in 1957, and began attending Friends' Meeting there at the age of sixteen. From 1981 to 1984, he worked with Quaker Peace and Service in Brummana and Beirut; and from 1988 to 1992 with Quaker Service Australia and American Friends' Service Committee in Cambodia. He also worked for several years in Australia on immigrant and refugee rights and welfare, with the Ecumenical Migration Centre and other community organisations. Since 1993, he has worked for Oxfam-Community Aid Abroad.

He lives in Melbourne with several friends.



Mark Deasey

Photo: Martin Wurt, Oxfam-CAA

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Robin Goodbody and Valerie O'Brien of Ireland Yearly Meeting gave invaluable assistance in checking my rendition of Friends' work in Ireland in the 1840s.

For the rest, what is offered here has been learned on a journey shared with many Friends and friends, in Melbourne, Brummana, Phnom Penh and elsewhere; in Meeting for Worship, and in the run of daily life. You know who you are, and I look forward to travelling the next stages with you.

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INTRODUCTION

I was simply given 'Quaker Service' as a theme for this year's lecture, and otherwise left alone with trust to develop it as I was led. A recurrent difficulty through all the reading and researching I did was to find or reach a simple, sure definition of just what 'Quaker Service' is. There is a huge wealth of examples of what has been done; even though Friends have been reassuringly spare in the documentation of the works they undertook, there is quite a lot written down as to what was done, and how it was done, both by Friends acting corporately, and as individuals in otherwise non-Quaker contexts. But in all the descriptions of the great mass of good works done, there is little that attempts to spell out what, if anything, is or was distinctively *Quaker* about what was attempted or achieved.

Maybe this is as it should be; as a body, we specifically eschew creeds and inflexible definitions, and a credal statement on service would be as restrictive and unsatisfactory, and maybe as deleterious to what we try to do, as a credal statement on belief would be to our corporate worshipping life. The closest we hover to this on any matter seems to be the Peace Testimony, and our use of that does not always bear too close an examination: "We do utterly deny all wars..." in fact, Quakers have taken up arms in a long list of conflicts, sometimes more numerous than they have refused military service. "The spirit of Christ is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil..." when in fact the essence of Quaker practice has been that we strive to remain open to new learning and new light, and with it, the acceptance that firm verities to which we have held may dissolve, and that we will be led to act in ways we previously could not have conceived.

However, in the course of reading and reflecting, I did come across a good few ideas and pointers that help narrow down a little what Quaker Service is, and - more importantly - possibly show how we need to move forward, in following the Light through the particular challenges of our own place and time.

What is *Quaker Service*?

The two words - 'Quaker' and 'service' - seem to fit naturally together. I think for most of us, the concept of 'service', of work done to meet others' material needs and to pursue a more just order of things in this world, is an inextricable part of how we see ourselves as Quakers. To attempt a first definition, if we acknowledge the Light, the indwelling presence of God in every human being, we inescapably acknowledge that we have an obligation for the well-being of others, whether this be through meeting the immediate needs of a neighbour for food, clothing, shelter or care when sick; or through seeking to change the order of the world as human beings have so far moulded it, to ensure that whole categories of people are not excluded from what is needed to provide them with life and dignity.

In this, we can and do take great comfort, and sometimes inspiration, from the wealth of work done by Friends, as a body or not, apparently out of all proportion to our tiny numbers.

Maybe it is pertinent at this point to give a couple of quotes as to how Quakers have been seen in this area: In 1831, Edward Trelawney, describing British response to the sufferings which accompanied the Greek struggle for independence said that [it moved even] "the gelid hearts and stolid visages of the Quakers...steel-hardened as they are to human suffering outside the pale of their own tribe".ⁱ Again more recently, one Friend described relief work done during and after the First World War as "second-rate work done by third-rate people"ⁱⁱ. While surely as Quakers we don't accept that there are such things as 'third rate people', the point is clear.

More contradictions come up once you look at the records; as is noted above, in several wars, Quakers signing up for military service have considerably outnumbered those who have chosen non-combatant roles, in service or otherwise. And within Quaker service organisations, non-Quakers have nearly always been in the majority, sometimes overwhelmingly so. The sense that good works in the outside world were a distraction from the life of the Spirit is a constantly recurring theme in Quaker history. This was perhaps most clearly marked in the period of 18th-century quietism; and many of Friends' most notable ventures into service run in parallel to the broader Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic revival movements of the 19th century, with their accompanying expressions of social concern.

In his history of British Friends' relief work during and after the Second World War in Europe, Roger Wilson noted that the Society of Friends in Great Britain had:

"no standing machinery for the carrying on of relief work at times of national or international disaster. Neither has it any regular machinery for carrying on social work at home. This is probably a good thing, for a church can easily be diverted from its real purposes, if it finds it easy to plunge into social crises." ⁱⁱⁱ

This from a Friend who had been solidly engaged in relief work for the previous decade, and who was documenting a quite extraordinary corporate effort. It is a useful pointer to the fact that although a large part of what we identify as distinctive Quaker Service is the bodies with the acronyms - QSA, QPS, AFSC, QPSNZ - these have not been part of the Quaker landscape for most of the history of the Society.

To attempt another definition: Roger Wilson records an instance where a Quaker relief worker in Germany just after the second World War was put on the spot, and asked what their motivation was: "Why, it is the Christian motive, the one of the Good Samaritan" ^{iv} As the recorder points out, the Good Samaritan wasn't a Christian. The point of Jesus' parable was that he wasn't accepted as a Jew, but as a spurned outsider offered what was right and needful, while those safe within the fold of the established order had comforted themselves with theologically correct reasons for doing nothing. There's more than one instance in our three hundred-odd years of history where Friends have taken the role of the priest or the Levite rather than the Samaritan; they may not predominate, but they do illustrate why the apparently simple and comforting story should stay with us and needle us.

Possibly the main reason I was asked to speak on this topic was that I've been hugely privileged over the last twenty years to work within organisations entrusted to carry forward Friends' concerns. I was with Quaker Peace & Service in Lebanon for three years in the early 1980s, and with both Quaker Service Australia and American Friends' Service Committee in Cambodia from 1988 to 1992. 'Privilege' is certainly the term: any undertaking of service overseas involves the cooperation of a large number of people, and to be the one at the end of the long chain, who actually gets to the coal face and sees the changes for the good that can be wrought, can be an extraordinary experience. In more than one instance, I've had the opportunity to see a concern, faithfully held and followed by

many, come to fruition, in ways that sometimes beggar rational understanding. In the dedication to his history of Friends' relief work in the Second World War, Roger Wilson mentions "the families of members of the Friends' Relief Service, who often bore most of the hardship, while we had most of the fun" ^v. Fun, at its best, the work often has been; though war and its aftermath are horrible and brutalising and degrading - as many Friends will know rather better than I. But it's important first to remember that the bulk of the hard slog of overseas work happens here at home, with Friends and others who choose to keep their work invisible or nearly so; and secondly that work in places that are in the headlines is a rather small fraction of what Friends do in service of others, and is not necessarily the most important or effective part of our work whether as individuals, or as a Society, at that. While I draw on my own experiences to illustrate what I have to say, it is in recognition that many who sit around me in Meeting have been doing much more, usually in quiet, unobtrusive ways, and rarely allude to it.

PART I: LESSONS FROM THE IRISH FAMINE

History of the Famine

But I want to start, not with the Middle East in the 1980s, nor with South East Asia in the 1990s. Soon after I'd first been commissioned to prepare this lecture, I came quite by chance across a copy of the *Transactions of the Society of Friends During the Famine in Ireland*, in the 1840s. This immediately took my interest; my own father's family migrated to Australia from Galway not directly as a result of the famine, but in the long period of economic stagnation and apparent hopelessness that followed it, and stories of the hunger were still passed down when I was young. I'd heard mention before of the Quaker relief efforts, and how well they were remembered down to the present day. The book I discovered was re-published as part of the 150th anniversary commemorations of the Hunger, and comes with a foreword from a present-day Irish Minister of State.

The story is simple enough in outline. By the 1840s, the overwhelming mass of the Irish peasantry in much of the country had become almost exclusively dependent on potatoes for their subsistence. When the potato blight first hit in 1845, nearly wiping out the crop, the result was correspondingly devastating. By the time the famine was more or less over four years later, the population of the country had been halved, through deaths of hunger and disease, and emigration, many of the emigrants dying en route to North America or soon after arrival. The small body of Irish Friends established a Relief Committee which organised and oversaw a vast relief operation, both to feed the starving, and to try to find more durable solutions to the hunger and poverty of which the Great Famine was the worst, but certainly not the only, manifestation.

In my current daily work, I am responsible for planning and managing programs to alleviate immediate poverty and suffering, and to help organise for lasting change overseas. Frequently, this intersects with the organising of large-scale relief in the wake of disaster - the cyclone in Orissa, the earthquake in Gujarat, floods in China - or of human conflict, as with the lingering civil war in Cambodia through the 1990s. In the light of this, I was struck by reading Irish Friends' records of their work, first by the scale and horror of the disaster with

which they were contending. I can safely say that no description of human misery and degradation, among the many that go across my desk every month, is worse than what Irish Friends witnessed then. Secondly, and most intriguingly, the way in which their response was organised seems to miss nothing which we now consider to be essential for effective, humane and responsible organisation of relief, and for orienting relief operations to eventually address the underlying causes of the suffering to which it was so imperative to give immediate relief. Thirdly, the essentially spiritual basis of Friends' work - in what was an intensely practical and efficient operation - is constantly evident through the very spare records. Their work was driven by their beliefs; at the same time, both the horror they witnessed and what they learned from their own and others' responses to it, informed their spiritual lives. In nearly every aspect of their records, I found close parallels with Quaker undertakings in service of which I have been a part, and not least in the fundamental and painful questions Friends in Ireland faced both during the progress of their work, and at the end.

I therefore intend to work from this record of Friends' work and deliberations to address some of those basic questions which we now need to confront: what do we understand as particularly *Quaker* service? What does our Quaker belief require of us when faced with the suffering of others? How far do we go in cooperating with the agencies of the State or the rest of the world to achieve the ends we undertake? How do we understand our own part in the circumstances which may have led to the suffering in the first place?

Friends in Irish Society

First, it is important to set the context of the condition of Irish Friends in the 1840s. In a population of eight million, they numbered around three thousand. While the famine devastated the peasantry of the west and the south of the country, Friends were concentrated mainly in the towns of the east, or else they were farmers on a commercial scale in areas of relative prosperity. Most traced their origins in Ireland to the settlements of English and Scots in the east and north of the country following the conquests of Oliver Cromwell and of William of Orange; each of these events in turn resulted in the punitive dispossession of Catholic landowners and much of their tenantry, some of whom were driven out to the relatively barren west ("Go to Hell or Connacht" as Cromwell's epithet had it), or remained, landless and reduced, in the East.

Quakers in Ireland could be seen as the beneficiaries of injustice, in the same sense that Anglo-Australians are the beneficiaries of the dispossession of the Aboriginal people; savage though Cromwell's and William of Orange's repression and purging was, it was never as far-reaching as the near-genocide conducted both by design and ignorance by settlers in Australia, and to which we must at least in part attribute the relative material comfort which most of us now enjoy. Few Irish Quakers became wealthy, but most lived well above the subsistence level of the peasant masses. At the same time, Quakers were never part of the ruling elite - the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. As in England, they were excluded from holding public office, or attending university, by reason of their refusal to swear the Oath of Allegiance. In Ireland, where further Penal Laws had been enacted specifically to weaken the power of the Catholic Church and of potential Catholic opposition to English rule, Quakers were further disabled - though not to the same extent as Catholics - as falling outside the Established Church, whether Anglican or the Presbyterian structure of the Scots settled in Ulster. As in England, it appears that most took this exclusion as a stimulus to industry and enterprise in those areas of society and the economy open to them, and many did well as merchants or commercial farmers. They still remained a very small and marginal body in a society where power was strongly contested, and fiercely guarded by those who had it.

Adherence to the Peace Testimony did mark them out in a way that most English Friends did not experience at the time. In the uprising of the United Irishmen against British rule in 1798, they took up arms for neither side. In fact, they were liable to disownment if they were known to possess firearms, a measure possibly intended as much to ensure the survival of the small and vulnerable community in the face of likely repression as to maintain strict adherence to the Peace Testimony for its own sake. Their avowed neutrality, as they supported neither the cause of the British Crown nor that of the rebels, allowed them to give relief and comfort to wounded and prisoners on both sides, and in small ways to mitigate the harsh repression that followed the quashing of the rebellion. This neutrality and humanitarian response was to be remembered to Friends' advantage for long afterwards.

The Quaker response: Formation of the Central Committee

When famine first struck, Quakers, being concentrated in the towns of the east and north, or on the more prosperous farmlands of Leinster, were not, by and large, among those directly affected. It was in the west and south that the

peasants, most with no title to any land of their own, were entirely dependent on the potato crop for food, and were left with no means of support when the blight virus first hit in 1845. By 1846, it was plain that this was not on the same scale as previous calamities, and far exceeded the chronic state of hunger in which most of the rural population lived for at least part of the year. Large-scale relief began to be organised both by government bodies, through the provisions of the antiquated Poor Law, and by private bodies, particularly the Churches. Relief Associations were formed both in Dublin and in England from the beginning of 1846, and raised large amounts of funds through public subscription. It was not until November - or, as it is recorded, eleventh month - of that year that Friends met in Dublin and decided to form their own Committee, rather than joining in the general effort, and the Central Relief Committee came into being.

Agreed functions of the Committee were:

"to raise a fund by subscriptions, which they might distribute where relief was particularly needed: and to obtain authentic information respecting the character of the distress in the different localities, in order that the best means might be devised for its alleviation".^{vi}

Twenty-one Friends (all men) were named, with power to co-opt, and otherwise to draw on the assistance of Friends elsewhere to carry out the relief operation. "Care was taken to include some whose commercial pursuits had brought them into intercourse with distant parts of the country;"^{vii} recognising that hunger was worst where infrastructure was next to non-existent, and that the economy of the remote districts functioned in ways that was understood poorly or not at all, by those used to the conditions of the east and north, where settlement was closer and markets well-established.

The Central Committee lost no time in establishing correspondence with Friends in both England and the USA, where considerable efforts had already been invested in raising funds for relief not only among Friends, but also the general public. While Friends in Ireland, England and the US gave with great generosity and real sacrifice, most of the funds and goods disbursed over the three years of the Committee's active life were actually given by non-Quakers. This is a recurrent pattern in Quaker relief and aid generally, and highlights two points: most flatteringly, that our operations have been held in high esteem outside our own Society for their efficacy and the integrity with which they are run. On a more humbling note, that the work for which Quakers have been given the credit

has been possible only because of exceptional sacrifice by non-Quakers, who remain individually and collectively anonymous.

The Committee were all volunteers; none of the 21 Friends was paid for the work they performed, but fitted it in as best they could with the demands of their farms or businesses; no standing Quaker Relief organisation was formed. Most would attend to the business of the Committee in the evenings, on conclusion of their own business for the day, though others had sufficient means to be able to devote more of their time.



Post war European relief 1947. Sewing circle in the Russell Street Meeting House, Melbourne

The Relief Strategy

The bulk of the Quaker effort lay in the establishment of soup kitchens; these had already been set up by Friends for short-term relief operations in England at different points, so the expertise with the usual machinery and organisation was there. Boilers were supplied, and grants of money made to those who were to operate them, the emphasis being on "those cases for which sufficient provision had not been made by the Government, or which did not properly come under its care, and which had not been relieved by the operation of other associations." ^{viii} This seems a simple and obvious point in relief management; but is sadly one not always honoured in large operations today, as some relief organisations jostle for the most accessible and camera-friendly locations, irrespective of whether these are the places in most need of the resources.

One key point to note here is that Quakers did not actually run the relief operation on the ground themselves, but worked through local committees, overwhelmingly made up of non-Quakers. The usual pattern was that these would be formed by the local clergy - Catholic and Protestant - the professionals and the gentry. The Central Committee would provide them with soup boilers, some instruction in their operation, and grants of money to purchase the wherewithal to make soup, later, with supplies of food shipped from America. This is a pattern that crops up again and again in Quaker relief work, in the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath, during successive famines in Russia, and elsewhere. From the outset, it was clear that the number of Quakers on the ground precluded their managing, or even closely supervising, the multitude of local relief operations they helped establish and continued to fund - doing so doesn't even seem to have entered the deliberations of the Central Committee as a possibility. Its concomitant was a high level of trust placed in the local partner groups (to use modern development-speak); this also recurs as one of the distinguishing marks of Quaker work in relief and development.

As an aside, it is interesting to record the reaction of one Quaker relief worker during a famine in southern Russia late in the 19th century. Quakers had over time forged links with Tolstoyans, Doukhobours and other fringe groups, and used this nucleus as the basis to distribute large amounts of food relief during the famines of the late 19th century. A Friend recorded with some exasperation the apparent expectation on the part of some of the British press and public at the time that the delivery of every last piece of bread should be monitored by British workers, to ensure that none was misappropriated. ^{ix} This is a response perennially

encountered with appeals for relief and development, to the present day. On the one hand, there is the legitimate expectation of those who give, that money and goods they provide will reach those actually in desperate need, with minimum loss and delay. On the other hand, as stories circulate about corruption and misappropriation of relief supplies by those not in need - and some of these have all too much basis in fact - the knee-jerk demand is for closer and tighter supervision, though this inevitably implies diverting a large part of the resources intended for those in need, to cover the salaries and costs of those brought in to monitor.

It is a tension which always needs to be managed. Blind trust is an abdication of responsibility, but attempts at excessive control not only drastically slow down and reduce the relief delivered, but undermine such trust as can be built, and which is essential for successful continuing work. There is no ready-made formula which can be applied.

As we've seen, Friends' situation in Ireland ruled out strict monitoring anyway. In many of the places where need was most acute, particularly in the west, there wasn't a single Quaker resident in a wide radius: to that extent, Friends made a virtue of necessity. At the same time, they were keenly conscious of their own accountability to those who had entrusted them with money and goods. The approach which was used to support and test out local partner committees for their capability and reliability was astute and effective. Small grants would be supplied initially, and as a local committee demonstrated itself able to handle these reliably, greater amounts would be given, with less stringent monitoring. The same basic management model is used for many relief operations today.

Early in the Transactions, it is recorded that one Friend volunteered his whole time to manage the correspondence of the Committee's office; and that "he was assisted by a paid secretary and the necessary staff of clerks.^x In the Committee's Preliminary Report of 1848, it is recorded that "Our endeavour has been to conduct the business at the smallest possible cost without the sacrifice of efficiency; and in this we have been greatly aided by the gratuitous service of several friends [capital F not specified] who have devoted their time with much diligence to this work. A considerable number of paid clerks have, however, been indispensable; and we have only to express our hope, that having reference to the magnitude and diversified character of the business entrusted to us, the expenses of management will be considered moderate." ^{xi}

Earlier in the same report, it is noted that "a well-arranged system of management and accounts was therefore necessary to ensure due regularity in all the details, and afford facility hereafter for any scrutiny to which our transactions may be subjected." ^{xii}

Many of those same accounts are indeed still available for scrutiny, being recorded with a level of detail and clarity - for what by any standards is a highly complex operation, stretching over several years - which I can only envy, even having all the wonders of electronic accounting systems, and highly-trained colleagues, at my disposal for often simpler tasks. It is well to keep in mind that many Friends engaged in this operation were, in the normal state of affairs, business people, and as such were particularly likely to recognise from the outset the need for clear accounting. In all too many high-minded humanitarian undertakings, the minutiae of paperwork are seen as inconveniences and afterthoughts, the emphasis on ensuring maximum impact for every dollar or pound or rupee donated as perhaps petty. It is unlikely that the relief operation in Ireland would have had the success it did had it not been for the real commercial shrewdness of several key Friends, co-existing with a deep altruism. We probably all know the old Philadelphia joke about how the Quakers "came to do good, and did well"; in Friends' meetings in Australia and much of the English-speaking world, you'll now find many more people from the 'helping professions' - to use a particularly horrible term - or other non-profit bits of the economy; the predominant social and political discourse is probably social-democratic or frankly socialist, as we respond to the situation of the times. It is important for those of us in that part of the political spectrum to acknowledge how nineteenth-century Friends, in Ireland and elsewhere, moved with no less integrity from a greatly different starting point.

A Quaker Service Model? - Voluntarism and Salaries

The model of the entirely voluntary Committee planning and managing is appealing, and fits with other aspects of Friends' organisation; we don't have paid clergy, and generally prefer that work undertaken under concern should be done collectively, and in our unpaid time if possible. It was possible for several Friends in Ireland at the time of the Famine to give very large amounts of unpaid time to the management of the relief operation; but this was in a context where several no doubt had the means to guarantee their livelihoods from their remaining income-earning time, and also, all names recorded being those of men, had been freed of

responsibility for household work. And even these were unequivocal in stating the need for an adequate paid administrative staff.

The tension between the natural Quaker emphasis on voluntarism, and the equally strong insistence on responsible stewardship, is clearly apparent here. Those recording the decisions seem to feel a clear need to justify the use of paid staff, irrefutable though the justification is. It is a tension which is at least as much present today, as we look at the most effective ways to carry forward corporate concerns. It is imperative to ensure that as little as possible of the resources given, often at great sacrifice, are consumed in our own expenses along the way. On the other hand, skimping on administration is a fast track to squandering of resources on a much greater scale. When Friends and others are released to work full-time on a concern, expecting a roughly normal salary can be seen as inappropriate: the work is certainly privileged, and offers a level of satisfaction and fulfillment which is rarely, if ever, found in the rest of the workforce. On the other hand, it may be just as un-Quakerly to set up workers under concern as a body apart. The concern is one held by the Society as a whole, and owned by us all. If we share equally the commitment to address suffering and injustice, should the workers who carry this forward on our behalf be expected to carry a larger part of the financial sacrifice?

As work under concern is nearly always carried out among people materially far poorer than ourselves, the question also arises as to how we are seen by those with whom we claim to stand in solidarity. The term has a hollow ring when the worker from outside is demonstrably insulated by a level of material privilege far beyond the means of the beneficiaries. Where it is a Quaker undertaking, however, can we soundly argue that the worker on site has a greater obligation to live simply and do without, than all those Friends in whose name the work is done? The fundamental problem is the disparity of wealth between and within societies, and requires all of our commitment.

I have found no easy or comfortable answers or solutions in twenty years work on and off on third world poverty. Maintaining volunteers overseas, in such a manner that they stay healthy and able to do their work, is not radically cheaper than paying moderate salaries. There are large numbers of people willing and able to work for a year, or two or three, for very basic remuneration and in austere circumstances, but few are able to maintain it beyond that point, and if we want to provide the best expertise - as nowhere are poor countries short of labour - it's not often available at cheap rates. This maybe calls into question whether or not Quakers should currently be undertaking the kind of work which requires placing

expatriates abroad long-term; do we need to re-think completely the ways we can support struggles for justice?

At a minimum, I've found the Quaker label a convenient one to hide behind at times: "My religion says I can't drive a car / have an air conditioner / hang around 5-star hotels / wear a suit". It's not entirely honest, but such small gestures often at least allow the beginning of dialogue.

Sectarianism in Relief

From the very outset, the principle was established by Irish Friends that

"no preference should be made in the distribution of relief, on the ground of religious profession; and there is reason to believe that the cases [of local relief operations supported by Friends] were few in which this condition was not faithfully observed".^{xiii}

This is one of the key principles for which Quaker relief is still remembered in Ireland. Unfortunately, several Protestant-run relief operations at the same time acquired a very bad reputation for feeding only Protestants, or those Catholics who would accept conversion. The memory of this is still bitter in Ireland today, and the derogatory term 'souters' is still sometimes applied to Protestants of Catholic ancestry. It seems a small enough matter to us now that Quakers should have stipulated against discrimination from the start. We don't proselytize, and the idea of doing so through offering food to the starving is repugnant. Unfortunately, this again is not a principle which can be taken for granted in modern-day relief operations, or longer-term development. Relief agencies do exert considerable power over those to whom they distribute food, water and medicine, and over the staff they employ locally to assist, and this can lead to blatant or subtle pressures to convert when the organisation is 'faith-based'.

A principle currently much talked about in large-scale relief work is 'Do No Harm', borrowed from the Hippocratic oath. This recognizes that, however laudable our humanitarian motives, when we seek to intervene for the good in a context which is already unfamiliar, and to which a further element of chaos has been added, it is all too easy to aggravate the damage and the suffering. This happens when we are not carefully observant of local dynamics, and don't think through how our actions may catalyse them. Relief and development work

favouring one confessional group over another does just this; it may engender resentment or overt conflict where there was none before.

One hugely heartening fact which is cited by those who run 'Do No Harm' training for relief and development workers is that, in situations of communal and religious conflict, coexistence and mutual toleration - if not complete acceptance - are at least as common as conflict and distrust. This was certainly what seemed to be the case in Lebanon when I was there. The horrors and atrocities were quite real enough, but one also constantly came across instances of individuals or groups of people who, having every imaginable personal and historical reason to suspect or even hate each other, lived together in mutual respect. I've seen the same many times over amongst people who've been on opposite sides of war and massacre in South East Asia. Quakers have nothing to teach, about peace or the Inner Light, to these people, to most of whom it would never occur to call themselves 'pacifists'. We do owe them the utmost we can muster in terms of support.

Irish Friends recorded, with evident pleasure, the many instances where they found Catholic and Protestant, clergy and laity, already working together and administering relief impartially. Their role was to support and strengthen communal harmony where it already existed, rather than to impose it out of a special allocation of the Light, and not to join with those who sought to take advantage of destitution and chaos to impose their own view.

Witnessing the Truth: Friends Recording of the Famine

One thread which runs consistently through the Irish narrative is Friends' constant seeking out and recording of the exact circumstances of the famine. An effective response must necessarily be based on as full a knowledge as possible of the issues with which they were seeking to grapple. James Hack Tuke and William Forster, both English Friends, travelled particularly extensively through the south and west of Ireland, as did several members of the Central Committee, who at one point record their own inadequacies to understand the suffering in the most distressed districts:

"It was under considerable difficulties, therefore, that we entered upon our task, and we could hardly expect to perform it without making serious mistakes. Those who have not been actually engaged in the administration of relief can very imperfectly comprehend its

difficulties. Strangers thought, when they knew that the distress was occasioned by want of food, that the obvious remedy was to pour into the country as much food as they could procure, and they were surprised and pained to find that their benevolent efforts were insufficient to effect the relief of destitution." ^{xiv}

The record goes on to explain the lack of infrastructure, distribution systems, and even of inhabitants sufficiently far from starvation themselves to ensure that food could be delivered to and prepared by those who needed it.

One result of Friends' investigations is that their notes have survived as some of the key records of the famine, and remain essential source material for historians up to the present. Intrinsic to this approach was a preparedness to actually see what was before their eyes, in particular, to recognize that in a country so close to Britain, and under British rule, radically different circumstances prevailed. William Bennett states:

"In the West it exhibits a people not of the centre of Africa, the steppes of Asia, the backwoods of America - not Hottentots, Bushmen or Esquimaux, neither Mahomedans nor pagans, but some millions of our own Christian nation at home, living in a state and condition low and degraded to a degree unheard of before in any civilized community; driven periodically to the borders of starvation, and now reduced by a national calamity to an exigency which all the efforts of benevolence can only mitigate, and not control, and under which... Thousands are dying like cattle off the face of the earth." ^{xv}

Taken in the context of the rest of his writings recorded here, I think it is reasonable to assume that William Bennett did not think it any more acceptable that Bushmen or Inuit, or Muslims or pagans, should suffer degradation and starvation than should white Christians; the examples are given for dramatic effect.

Evaluating Service

Friends were repeatedly criticized through the 19th century, and subsequently, for an apparent fascination with the relief of suffering in far-off and exotic places, neglecting issues of poverty and suffering closer to home. It is a criticism still made of overseas development agencies, and the validity of it is

perhaps only slightly diminished by the fact that it is most frequently heard from those who themselves do little or nothing for the relief of poverty or injustice either at home or abroad. In saying that charity begins at home, the key word, after all, is 'begins'. The essential point to be taken is that poverty and marginalisation, whether located near or far, tends to have similar or identical causes. This is increasingly true in the age of rapid globalisation, and to fully address the one, we must at least be aware of the other. It is now pretty much inescapable to know that conditions of life in many Australian aboriginal communities can be as appalling as any recorded in far-off continents: further, that the worst is not all in remote outback communities, but also on the fringes of, or deep within, the same cities in which most Friends live. Official and private attempts to address the issues to date have often been as misinformed and misdirected as were those of large British relief bodies in Ireland 160 years ago. Irish and English Friends at least undertook, to the best of their ability, the frightening task of seeking to look clearly at the horrors that were in front of them, and to proceed in their response on the basis of what they saw.

The meticulous study of the effects of famine brought Friends to analyse the causes of the hunger, and they were able to discard many of the common prejudices and assumptions which hindered other relief efforts. In Ireland at that time, the easy response of laying the blame on the sufferer was at least as prevalent as it often is in comparable situations today. It is a readily understandable response. The enormity of such disasters is hard to face, and if we have any kind of belief in common human responsibility, the suffering of which we become aware demands action and maybe sacrifice, or even abandonment of some degree of privilege. It's a good deal easier to allocate responsibility for part or all of the suffering to the sufferer; or to assume that the victims are used to this, come from a lower order of humanity less sensitive to suffering, or similar. Nor is this confined to nasty economic rationalists sitting in armchairs remote from the scene; it occurs among aid workers in the field, either as a defence against the daily barrage of horrors, or as a reason not to question a comfortable, if demonstrably inadequate, means of response.

There was an obvious channel ready for this denial in the case of the famine. The prejudice held that the Irish were by nature shiftless, improvident and lazy. This was by no means exclusive to England, nor was it by any means universal there. It gave comfort to those in Ireland who were themselves insulated from the effects of the famine, to categorise the peasantry; or to those larger surplus-producing farmers to categorise subsistence, tenant farmers.

I remember on return from my first stint in Lebanon, being surprised at the assumption nearly everyone had, that having been so close to where civil war was taking place, and living among people who'd experienced so much of it, that I'd necessarily have a much greater understanding of what it was all about, and what could be learned from it: that to be close up meant to participate in the reality, and that authentic experience was unavoidable, whereas to be 15,000 km distant was to be hopelessly cocooned. Experience had actually shown me quite the contrary. It seemed people could almost as easily dismiss or ignore what was going on 50 km away as 15,000; or even 5 km away, or 2, if they so chose. Again, this may be a necessary survival mechanism for many. But it is to be borne in mind when assessing or trying to learn from the actions of those who have found themselves in apparently parallel situations to ours, that there was nothing *necessarily* in Irish Friends' situation and proximity which led them to the knowledge they gained or the fruitful action they brought out of this.

First, in addressing the state of the individual peasant farmers, with chronic indebtedness and uncertain supplies of food even in non-famine years, the committee states that:

"Many have attributed this state of chronic poverty to the facility with which a bare subsistence was obtained by the cultivation of the potato - a widespread view at the time of the peasantry content to live in squalor as three months labour on a small plot yielded sufficient potatoes to feed the family for a year." ^{xvi}

Mildly, the committee go on to state that

"Such to us does not appear to have been the case. The people lived on potatoes because they were poor; and they were poor because they could not obtain regular employment. This want of employment seems in great measure to have arisen from the state of the law, and the practice respecting the occupation and ownership of land."

Echoes of both attitude and response are unfortunately common enough today; subsistence rice farmers in Cambodia and Laos are accused - often by those responsible for agricultural policy and extension, and with every opportunity to know the real facts - of taking it easy on their single crop, and spending the rest of the year waiting for ripe pawpaws to fall off the tree. This ignores the many constraints which leave them with no other means of making a livelihood, and the year-round cycle of hard labour.

To the charges of improvidence, Friends were at pains to point out the sacrifices made by poor Irish families, in both Ireland and America, to offer help to both neighbours and relatives even worse off than themselves, and to contribute to the larger relief effort. Jacob Harvey of Philadelphia wrote "It is right that credit should be given to the poor, abused Irish for having done their duty," ^{xvii} contrasting their sacrificial giving with the stinted charity of the wealthy. Being themselves entrusted with the hard-earned savings of many Irish-Americans, Friends were particularly sensible of this, and the accountability which fell to them in consequence.

On the immediate and practical level, Friends' awareness showed in the schemes for longer-term rehabilitation which they introduced, including experimental farms and agriculture projects, introducing alternative crops not susceptible to blight. In their recording of these, it is noteworthy that they felt it necessary to rebut the assumption that the Irish could work with no other tool than a spade, and grow no crop other than potatoes, ultimately pointing out that differences of productivity were a result of circumstance and opportunity, rather than of intrinsic racial characteristics.

We cannot, unfortunately, claim this level of clear-sightedness as being universally true for Quakers at the time; in a letter dated 9th of second month, 1847, accompanying bills for large amounts of relief money, a committee of Philadelphia Friends note that "few efforts have been made by the poor to cultivate their fields, for lack of seed, or other causes; ... your people ... should be urged to help themselves; idleness is the parent of mischief, and dependence on charity degrading and uncertain." ^{xviii}

This analysis, as a whole, does not entirely lack merit, and comes, of course, from a group of people who had made huge efforts to raise money for the victims of the famine. Friends in Ireland noted at several times with concern and compassion the damaging effects of protracted hand-out charity. But it is hard not to suspect that they may have wished Philadelphia Friends had spared themselves the effort of deliberating on and drafting this particular communication.

Several of Friends' initiatives in rehabilitation were well ahead of their time, simple though the concepts are. They trained farmers in new agricultural techniques, provided loans to fishing people in several communities where they had sold or pawned their equipment to pay for food, when their usual customers had had no money to buy the catch; trained women and girls in marketable

handicraft skills - all of these are standards of modern post-disaster rehabilitation. The success of the agricultural training in particular was widely commented on, although distressingly, the model seems not to have been picked up by larger agencies, intent as they were on classic relief models of workhouse, soup kitchens and public works. Of the last mentioned, Friends were highly critical: for a pittance of a daily wage, quite insufficient to feed a family, people severely enfeebled by hunger and disease were brought out in freezing weather in inadequate clothes to build roads which few were likely to use. Many died as a result, and the work was poorly done. Modern 'food for work' schemes are not usually quite as bad, but often have the same underlying flaws, and most often yielding nothing of lasting value. In recording the schemes of making small loans to families to re-establish their various livelihood activities, Friends noted that the poorest could nearly always be relied on to make prompt repayment, while the better off (to use a very relative term) would commonly find excuses or subterfuges to delay or avoid repayment. This is an entirely familiar story to anyone involved in managing micro-credit schemes for development now.

The Famine in Political Context - Critique of the Law

Thus far, it is plain that Friends brought considerable critical insight to the practicalities of the relief operation. They examined local conditions carefully, and designed the relief distribution around them. At root, it could be said that the practice of recognizing 'That of God in everyone' enabled them more easily to bypass racist assumptions about the people with whom they were working, and to introduce methods of rehabilitation which gave scope for their strengths and skills. In these two aspects, the Quaker operation is already distinctive, and both are considered fundamental principles of sound relief practice today. This does not mean, however, that they are universally followed.

What is at least equally distinctive from the records, however, is Friends' constant striving to come to terms with the root causes of the famine and accompanying distress, and why the bulk of relief operations seemed inadequate or even misdirected - and in this, they included their own. In the introduction to the Transactions, it is stated almost apologetically that

"in venturing thus to place before the public our opinions on social and economic questions of great moment ... we feel we are going somewhat beyond what some may consider the duty of the Committee of a charitable organisation; and that in so doing, we may

expose ourselves to censure as ... interfering in matters in which we have no proper concern." ^{xix}

Politely, however, the writers go on to say precisely why they cannot abstain from critique of legal provisions which had aggravated the cause of the famine, and other aspects of the social structure which had prevented the population from helping themselves. These things, they state, had 'forcibly' drawn their attention, and in publicizing them, they were seeking the general welfare and prosperity of the whole of Irish society.

The three principal targets of Friends' critique were the land laws; the poor law; and the corn law, and quite specific recommendations were made for their amendment.

The land laws were targeted as a factor considerably aggravating destitution. Generations of landlords had lived beyond their means off their rents and expectations thereof. In many parts of western Ireland, there was hardly a landlord in residence, as they preferred the bright lights of London or Bath. Little or nothing was invested in improving their estates, and the incentive was to squeeze more and more tenantry on to their lands, growing potatoes for subsistence, and wheat and other grains to pay the rent. When the potato crop failed, families starved rather than eat the grain they had grown and harvested, as failure to pay the rent would mean eviction and certain death on the roadsides. Land encumbered with mortgages and other debts - and often there were tangles of these, going back generations could not be sold. Indebted absentee landlords had no other means to clear their debts, and so the cycle continued. It was from the landlords and other property owners that the rates were levied to pay for government poor relief, and from the indebted, of course, few or no rates were forthcoming; or to get the money to pay the rates, they squeezed the tenants even harder.

The British Corn Law, designed to maintain the income of the English landlord class, put high tariffs on the import of grain, keeping up the price for producers, and thus also for the mass of consumers, by this stage poor industrial wage earners in the cities of England and Scotland. This gave further incentive for landlords in Ireland to have tenants grow cash crops for the English market, rather than commodities affordable for local consumption. Ireland continued to export large quantities of food to England during all the famine years, and when grain became available for sale in the impoverished districts of Ireland, the already high price was further inflated by local profiteers. There was deliberation in the British

government as to whether there should be intervention against profiteering from the starving, but the decision was made that it would be improper to interfere in the natural profit motive, and the matter was left. It would be nice to dismiss this as one of the wild excesses of 19th century laissez-faire capitalism, but responses uncomfortably close in wording can be heard almost annually to disaster situations, with idolatrous faith placed in 'the market' to ultimately solve all problems; these require Friends' response now, as much as did the corn laws in the 1840s. In one of the worst Ethiopian famines of the 1970s, beans from Ethiopia were being unloaded from ships in the port of Melbourne, until waterside workers became aware of this, and took action. Vietnam has been applauded for using free market reforms to become the world's third-largest exporter of rice; at the same time, up to 45% of Vietnamese children under 5 years old suffer malnutrition for at least part of every year.

Examples are legion. Amartya Sen wrote from the experience of the famine in Bengal in the 1940s, when hundreds of thousands died, to show that the famine was not caused by gross lack of food as such, but because markets and distribution systems were structured in such a way as to leave the rural poor no access to the actually sufficient supplies of food. The Ukrainian famine of the 1930s, in which possibly millions died, was deliberately engineered by Stalin to quash opposition: people starved as grain was loaded onto railway trucks to be taken elsewhere. In every case where our compassion is called on, we need to look carefully and seek the real causes of the hunger. Giving in solidarity is nearly always right, but we also need to seek ways of addressing the structures which unnecessarily condemn people to perpetual vulnerability.

The Irish Poor Law had been introduced in 1838, as a makeshift and stopgap measure, principally intended to slow down potential hordes of destitute Irish crossing to England and Wales to avail themselves of the rather more effective provisions of the Poor Law there. It was still designed on an English model, with English conditions in mind, and its disastrous inappropriateness to Ireland became evident in the Famine years. There might be few or no ratepayers to support the services; the workhouse might be some 50 km distant from those people in need of relief; and no workhouse could possibly accommodate more than a fraction of the thousands needing relief in anyone district of the West.

Analysis of the failure of these three key items of legislation recurs throughout the Transactions, and is presented in detail in the *Address to the Public*, prepared after the worst of the famine crisis was over, in 1849. Friends belonged largely to the mercantile classes themselves, and the advantages of freer

trade had long been obvious to them. As such, they were in a particularly good position to offer critique. They were not bound up in the prestige of inherited landed property, and its interests were not theirs, but probably most of all, they were moved by a sense of compassion for the unutterable miseries they did witness, and a sense of near-despair at the inadequacy of either their own efforts, or those of other operations they observed, to bring an end to the horror, or even substantially diminish its progress.

Drawing the Line - Limits of Cooperation with Government

By this stage, the Quaker relief operation had inevitably been widely noticed, in official circles as well as by those who had benefited from it. It had become the main channel for relief funds and goods raised by the Irish in America - to the total of some millions of dollars, in the values of the time, and in today's terms, probably on a par with some of the largest disaster response operations mounted. All this had been administered by a volunteer Committee, as we have seen above, of whom some had worked full time and more, and a team of paid clerks. For the record, the total administrative overhead for the entire period of the operation was in the region of 2%; impressive by any standards. In managerial terms, it had been an extraordinarily effective piece of work.

In June of 1849, however, when outbreaks of potato blight and consequent hunger had recurred in some parts of Ireland, Sir Charles Trevelyan, who had charge of the famine response for the British government, wrote to the Committee enquiring as to their plans for pursuit of further relief, and expressing the Prime Minister's readiness to contribute one hundred pounds out of his own pocket for such work, this affording " ... proof of his Lordship's continued, and, I must say, well-deserved confidence in your Society".^{xx}

The Committee's letter in response is diplomatic, but firm, and attempts to bring home to Trevelyan some of the basic facts of the situation of which he had managed to remain ignorant for over three years. The situation was far beyond the scope of any private body to tackle; many of those most active in relief were now exhausted, and possibly themselves impoverished, and even starving. Friends had chosen to devote their remaining resources to model farms, and other training activities "which might encourage the industry of the country."^{xxi} The measures which needed to be taken to have appreciable impact on the continuing hunger and destitution could only be undertaken by the Government, and Friends were no longer able to work alongside the Poor Law.

In conclusion, they said, "we are not now in a position to undertake the distribution of charitable relief; and we are truly sorry that it is therefore out of our power to offer ourselves as the distributors of Lord John Russell's bounty to our suffering fellow-countrymen. I trust thou wilt accept this long explanation of our views." ^{xxii}

The extent to which we should work with government agencies, and the effect that working within or alongside government schemes has on our own determined priorities, is not a new matter for Friends' deliberation. For Friends in the USA, the choice has been relatively clear-cut, as the role of the American state vis-a-vis the disadvantaged and oppressed in the third world has consistently weighed in on the negative side of the balance, and acceptance of the terms of government funding would compromise Friends' standing and the quality of the work they could do. Australian government policy and practice abroad has certainly not been uniformly benign, and in several instances - Vietnam in the 1960s, East Timor from 1975 to 1999, to name just two - Friends have campaigned actively against it. In other instances, Friends have felt that government's foreign policy goals were sufficiently compatible with the goals of peace and justice for us to be able to seek and use government aid funds for our own programs. If we accept that the state properly has a role in redistributing wealth, we should, at least in principle, be able to claim part of those taxpayer-provided resources for work on behalf of the large numbers of people who believe in work for justice. I don't think it's possible to draw a precise line and state categorically when and where accepting government funds is compatible with our principles, and when it becomes compromising. It is, however, an area where we need to maintain constant vigilance, and be prepared to walk away from tempting amounts of funds when we deem that the line has been crossed. From policy level, government aid practice often veers towards seeing non-government organisations as convenient and cheap providers of services, and may also offer poorly-designed and constructed funding schemes as a sop to public opinion. The funds Friends' refused in 1849 were from the Prime Minister's own pocket, rather than government coffers, but the basic principle holds: they were not susceptible to the flattery paid to them as convenient distributors of relief, and they took the opportunity to make a direct and audible critique where it was likely to be heard.

Difficult Questions

Helder Camara, the Catholic Bishop of Recife, in Brazil, famously said "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." The immediate relief of suffering is quite non-threatening. Friends have consistently done it no less well than others, and often better than many. In Ireland then, and on many occasions subsequently, the risk was run of being compartmentalised as plaster saints. Others could easily find gratification in giving for the ongoing work, and not be discomfited by the hard questions as to why the work had been necessary in the first place, or whether a change of approach was needed.

Friends themselves - ourselves - seem to have been more than once seduced by the kudos that particular ventures have brought them - as well as by the very real gratitude of those benefiting when a closer attention to the changing situation around us, and to the leadings of the Spirit, might have led us along a better, if harder, path. This was a question that commonly occurred to several of us at Brummana High School in Lebanon. The school had been initially founded by Friends in the 1870s as a vocational training institute for poor village children, in what was then a remote and dangerous part of Lebanon. By the 1960s, it had become possibly the most prestigious English language medium school in the Middle East, and attracted the children of the elites from as far as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, while also providing scholarships off the surplus to poorer local children. By the time I commenced teaching, in 1981, the civil war had been more than six years under way; almost no-one sent their children from abroad to study in Lebanon, and the school essentially served the local middle class, many of them affluent. Throughout, the small core of Lebanese Quakers did strive to maintain Friends' values with the school and community, and much good work was done. A high proportion of the heads of Lebanon's many score of militias, as well as political leaders of all stripes throughout the Middle East, had been educated at the school, and this, it was argued, had at times opened channels for peacemaking initiatives which might not otherwise have occurred. But the burden of maintaining the management of a complex institution of that size, from the small and distant resources of Friends' House in London, in a situation of war and upheaval, was a huge one. The question could not but arise as to whether Friends ought to have more scrupulously sought out the Light on how best to proceed in the Middle East rather earlier, allowing the same resources to be used to better effect. There are no doubt several other instances from our history that Friends can cite.

Friends in Ireland at the end of the 1840s were in no danger at all of being lulled into a comfortable institutional role, partly because of their utter exhaustion, and even demoralisation by that point. Little enough is spelled out; individual efforts and privations are consistently played down in the records, at the same time that fulsome praise is given for the work of non-Friends. Jacob Harvey, a Friend in New York who had been particularly active and indefatigable in raising funds and goods for relief in Ireland, died of fever contracted while working among destitute Irish immigrants, horrifying numbers of whom died on the voyage across, or soon after arrival. Several Irish Friends had their health permanently damaged through their efforts, and died within a few years. Apart from appending the letter which tells of Jacob Harvey's death, there is virtually no mention of what must have been considerable suffering and loss through the Central Committee, its correspondents and the community of Irish Quakers generally.

Their assessment of the impact of their work contrasts strongly with later historical analyses, or even that of their contemporaries: In the *Address to the Public* published in 1849, the Committee states in opening that "the conviction is painfully forced on us, that the public bounty distributed through us, as well as the relief afforded from other sources ... have produced scarcely any permanently useful result." ^{xxiii} This is not to say Friends were insensible of the value of having kept alive people who would have otherwise starved to death, but the overwhelming reality which seemed to sit before them was of the urgency of effecting major social and legal change, if the danger of exactly the same famine recurring was to be avoided. "Our paramount want is not money; it is the removal of those legal difficulties which prevent the capital of Ireland from being applied to the improved cultivation of its soil, and thus supporting its poor by the wages of honest and useful labour."

Jonathan Pim, one of the Secretaries of the Committee, was to devote much of the rest of his life to the cause of land reform.

History has since dealt more generously with those involved in the relief operation than they did themselves. There was 'permanent value' not only in keeping people alive, but in maintaining models of non-sectarian collaboration, when distress was prone to further deepen social cleavages; in bringing to wider public attention the real conditions of the famine-afflicted areas; and in putting the case for reform of the land laws so clearly and with such a fund of evidence. Also, probably, that the standards and methods set for large-scale efficient relief operations were put to use in several subsequent crises, in Ireland and elsewhere.

But there is a strong sense, through the real anguish and near-despair, of a difficult spiritual journey underway. As we've noted, not much deliberation or spiritual seeking apparently went on when Friends first decided to launch the relief operation, and this had been par for the course through the centuries. Friends have (very fortunately) tended to act first, and articulate spiritual learning as they went, or when there was time to draw breath.

PART II: FAITH AND ACTION

The Spiritual Journey in Ireland

Through most of the writings of the time, references to the Famine as a divine affliction or visitation are frequent. This kind of thinking certainly gave comfort to the likes of Charles Trevelyan and fitted with his particular brand of Evangelical theology. If not a specific punishment of the sufferers - though that possibly lurked in the background of their thinking - it could be fitted into the category of salutary periodic reminders of humanity's general unworthiness and dependence on divine bounty. Nor is this thinking absent from Friends' views, to quote one particularly discomfiting excerpt from the Epistle from London Yearly Meeting at the time:

“Within the last year, it has pleased the Almighty to visit the nation of Ireland with sore affliction ... We feel that it becomes us to speak of the dispensations of the Most High with reverence and fear ... His creatures stand in awe before him trembling and, it may be, dumb with astonishment ... desire to be instructed by that which we have seen and heard ... it may be, that in the sufferings which he has permitted to befall some of his children, he designs not only to bless his chastening to their greatest benefit, both in this life and that which is to come, but to sanctify it to those that are round about them. When the adversities of our neighbours, their poverty and distress have the effect of softening our hearts ... they are made a means of good to us, and we are prepared to feel the force of the words 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'”.

Those Friends, Irish, English and American, most directly engaged in the relief work came out of a social context where such thinking was the norm. The famine and the relief operation dragged them through a whole range of experiences: the unspeakable suffering and degradation many of them witnessed; the abiding humane and spiritual qualities of many of those worst afflicted; the tremendous energy, generosity and goodwill coming from often unexpected quarters to relieve suffering, and also - it can be assumed from the evidence of other historical sources, though Friends allude to it little or not at all - cynical

profiteering and wilful callousness on the part of some merchants and landlords. They had been brought up hard against the complete ineffectiveness of the legal frameworks that existed and the ways in which they aggravated quite unnecessarily the sufferings they had witnessed. Hence the overriding thrust of what they wrote out of their experience, and the ongoing campaigns for reform.

A profound sense of unease comes from Friends' attempts, recorded in the *Transactions*, to grapple with both the social and the spiritual issues before them. On the one hand, they defer to Divine Providence, and state that "the awful visitation with which it has pleased Divine Providence to afflict our country was doubtless intended in wisdom for our good."^{xxiv} At another point, it is stated that 'true religion and sound morality' are the only sure foundations for national life. Friends were, after all, solid citizens, appealing to other solid citizens. Yet at the same time, Friends say that one of the results of the famine "has been to fix the public attention on various social evils, which it brought more prominently into view", and venture to hope that this will allow energy to be given to their reform. Less equivocally, in the 1849 *Appeal to the Public*, "Our misfortunes are no longer contemplated with surprise, but are regarded as the natural result of our social arrangements. The consideration [of these] ought to explain the causes of our past distress, and point out the remedies." Friends speak at some length of "the unsound state of our social condition," and "the evils which have long weighed down the energies of our population."^{xxv}

Most forthright of all, William Forster, an English Friend, in one of his letters, written after weeks of travel amidst horrific scenes of starvation and degradation, says "the misery of Ireland must be a grievous burden on [England's] resources, in return for long centuries of neglect and oppression".^{xxvi} The potato blight might well have been a divine affliction, Friends' thinking seems to run, but that people should suffer and starve as a result of it was a result of avoidable human failing.

Learning and Service: A Quaker Approach?

If there is an identifiable Quaker approach to service, we could hope that it is embodied in this: that as in worship we follow the leadings of the Spirit and the Light faithfully, we are prepared to be led where it takes us: to let go of comfortable certainties, and to be taken into new knowledge and also through painful and difficult experiences. The journey is not a comfortable one for the most part - it can be terrifying at times, and often leads close to despair. If we

accept that there is that of God in everyone, others cannot be *objects* of charity - we go prepared to encounter their full reality, and to be taught and changed by it. In fact, if we take the word 'charity' at its original meaning, and as it is expounded in the Epistle to the Corinthians, the same is implicit - charity is compassionate, divinely-enabled love, which recognises the divine in the other.

Very early in the time when I had begun attending Meeting, a Friend quoted from the third chapter of Ezekiel, when the prophet had been commanded to prophesy to the Hebrews in captivity. He says "I came to them ... that dwelt by the river of Chebar, and I sat where they sat, and remained astonished among them seven days" before giving voice. The Friend who spoke had earlier in her life gone as a missionary teacher to Fiji. The verse had been quoted to her before her departure, and, she said, remained with her throughout - though in her case, she sat astounded far longer than seven days. Ezekiel was carrying with him what he held as divine prophecy, which runs to forty-five more chapters, delivered to these people and his several other audiences. Friends' ministry is usually somewhat briefer, and most of us would be loath to consider the whole of what we say as springing purely from divine guidance. But even endowed with the certainty he had, Ezekiel found he had to "sit where they sit", and wait in silence before presuming he could communicate.

One common image used by Friends when talking about faith and action is that of a tree, where we compare the leaves and branches to the work we do, and the roots to the quiet waiting on the Spirit. Unless we water and tend the roots, the analogy goes, we will put out no good leaves. In more than one place, though, the image is turned on its head. Whether spelled out or not, what comes through Friends' writings is the sense that spiritual growth comes from action. A. Ruth Fry, writing of Friends' relief work in the First World War, said "Our experiences have made many of us know the great truths of religion with a certainty not reached before."^{xxvii} Roger Wilson, writing the Swarthmore Lecture thirty years later, justified analysing Quaker relief work." not because I believe it can be explained, but because experience in it helped many of us to know something more of the will and ways of God ... than any other experience in our lives."^{xxxviii} If we go back to the image of the tree, it is well to remember that the leaves also, through photosynthesis, produce the carbon compounds which build the trunk and the roots. As I've said above, Friends rarely, if ever, seem to have gone through a lengthy process of seeking spiritual guidance before deciding to launch into action. When need was obvious and urgent, operations commenced at very short notice, though in their continuation, Friends' manner of reaching decisions and pursuing action was grounded in silent worship. Thinking further, though, the

dichotomy of faith and action, spirituality and works, becomes less and less relevant the more we look at our work in the whole of the life of the Meeting. We are ready for action when the need arises in large part *because* we have waited quietly on God's leadings. The act of worship is the seeking to drop the self and its immediate outward concerns: to shed our own agendas and expectations, and to be ready to be carried where the Spirit moves us. The constant practice of turning towards the Light is the essence.

In Deuteronomy, God's explanation to the Hebrews through Moses is given as follows:

" See, I have set before you this day life and good; death and evil, in that I command you this day to love the Lord your God and to walk in God's ways and keep God's commandments," then further "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that thou and thy seed may live"

Some of the context sits uncomfortably with many of us today; the book of Deuteronomy is replete with the minute regulations of Jewish law, much of which now seems redundant, and strongly patriarchal and authoritarian. Selective quoting from the text is used by fundamentalists to justify a range of oppressive actions and attitudes. But these verses come right at the end of the books of the law, when Moses was preparing to die, and close to speaking his last. The words come as a tender, pleading exhortation, at the end of a long period of trial and danger: If you remember nothing else, remember this.

Service, when we come down to it, is making the choice for life: automatically, instinctively, in the minute and mundane matters of daily life, as well as the prominent activities at times of crisis. In my experience, when we talk about service being grounded in worship, it means that the constant practice of turning towards the Light, of abandoning preconceptions and allowing ourselves to be led, means that when we are called, we respond without apparently thinking; we make the choice without it seeming to be a choice at all.

Courage

A character in one of Patrick White's novels, who has returned from the war much-decorated for bravery, says "courage is only fear running in the right direction". That is maybe less than the truth, but still rings uncomfortably familiar when you've been in situations of heightened danger. The adrenalin could carry

you fast and decisively in one direction or the other. But first, the practice of turning to the Light can be what helps us run in the right direction rather than the wrong one. There are no shortages of spectacular examples from Quaker history. In 1876, when Ottoman troops were massacring Bulgarian civilians, Elizabeth Bevan Tonjoroff stood alone and faced down a patrol of Bashi-Bazouks, defying them to touch the young girls who had been given into her care; they turned away ashamed.^{xxix} There was the young doctor in the Franco-Prussian wars, who broke through battle lines to tend, as best he could, wounded troops dying of cholera, until he himself died.^{xxx} There are the many Friends Ambulance workers in several of the wars of the last century who have faced extreme danger and often died.

This is one small aspect of the courage to which we are exhorted. As one Friend in my own meeting, who has good reason to know, once said, there are people all around us for whom the act of getting up every day and keeping going is an act of heroism. The struggle to maintain life with decency, to not give in to the degrading pressures of domestic violence, substance abuse, grinding poverty - even as it exists in urban Australia - can be at least as hard as doing very visible good works in a far-off place. In the latter, the choice between life and death, blessing and cursing, is a stark and simple one. There may be some effort in following through the choice, but none in deciding where the choice lies. In daily life, there can be less of a sense of clear light and pitch dark; rather a constant straining to discern the least murky shade of grey, and follow it through in the hope and faith that the cloud will clear, at least momentarily. Friends in Australia are predominantly middle-class and cushioned from the worst oppressions which our society (small 's') does mete out. Even so, within our own ranks, or on our own doorsteps, there are significant numbers of those who are suffering. Being faithful to the Light means being ready to see suffering where it most discomforts us, and to have our preconceptions challenged as we are called to respond to it.

As an aside, it is worth mentioning one experience which has cropped up frequently for me in supporting community development work around Asia and elsewhere: the first step in getting any kind of project going is participatory research into community needs by those who want to initiate the action. They go through their own village or urban neighbourhood meticulously surveying the exact conditions of people's lives, their income, their working hours, food consumption, sickness, and the resources they have to call on. A nearly universal experience, when people come back to compare notes, is that the researchers will say they had no idea there was such an extent or depth of poverty in that place; usually the same close-knit community in which they have lived and worked for

years or decades. Another year, or three years into the project, and the same people will say that they have found more people, even poorer or more marginalised, than those in the first survey. I'm quite convinced that any and every one of us would have the same experience, if we were to survey our own immediate environment. Charity does begin at home, and sometimes meets its greatest challenges there, but the learning is to be carried on.

Our Failings in Perspective

In reading various accounts of Quaker relief and service activities over the last two centuries, I found a bizarre sense of comfort in the number of occasions where Friends and those who worked with them really mucked it up, and at the amount of human pettiness which was shown. During some of what we've come to consider the most heroic episodes of our Society's history, the human failings are all too familiar. When a delegation from London was expected at Brummana High School late in the 19th century, Theophilus Waldmeier, who founded both the school and the Middle East's first mental hospital, sent out one of the staff to pick up the empty gin bottles from under the shrubs in the school drive.^{xxxii} One particularly well-recorded instance was that of relief workers in France after liberation in 1944. British and American Friends were quartered together in Paris and clashes in cultural behaviour were manifest. As an observer quotes, "The two nationalities set to work to flick each other on the raw in every conceivable manner; and did this work very thoroughly, till at times it seemed as if our experiment in cooperative living was doomed to sudden and violent end ... [It] goes to prove that there is not very much difference between pacifists and anyone else, a fact which everyone is in danger of forgetting."^{xxxiii} In this, as in other cases, things were made up in time, but it is a constant refrain, and again shows that, however close or far we stand from great historical events and moments, the imperative to maintain the discipline of the Spirit in everyday matters is the same. War and crisis don't let us off the hook for being "faithful in minute particulars"; at the same time, we need to learn from episodes such as these, that the best work in Quaker and other traditions of service was not done by a superior order of beings, but by people with at least our own quota of failings.

Aid workers were once famously described as a combination of 'Mercenaries, misfits, and missionaries'. I don't think any of us who've had significant experience of working overseas would have much argument with the definition. Quakers, and people who are attracted to work in Quaker organisations, are unlikely to be mercenaries, however much difficulty we may

have in resolving the tension between our salaries or allowances, and the living standards of those among whom we work. We are often moved with a strong sense of mission, but it is rarely connected with seeking converts. One of our strengths as a Society is that when we practise our belief in 'that of God in every one' we do easily incorporate a great diversity of people, many of whom don't easily fit the norms of the society around them. It is pretty hard to work effectively in a completely different cultural, political and social context when you've never had cause to question your own society's ways of working, or how you fit or fail to fit - into it. Gay and lesbian workers figure out of all proportion among expatriate aid staff, as do several other categories of people outside the comfortable norms of their places of origin. (I remember once doing some quick mental arithmetic in Phnom Penh, and estimated that about a quarter of all the aid agencies would have to close up if all gay and lesbian staff were to disappear overnight). In Australia at the moment, Quakers are not as marginal or peculiar a body as we have been at other times, or still are in other places. In a society which places much less value on religious practice overall, differences in belief are not of great concern much of the time. In Ireland in the 1840s, it was partly Friends' quite tenuous position in the wider society that made their response so effective. It's important to remember that the things which set us at odds with broader social approval, and the people amongst us who might cause us and others real discomfort, which can help us, often in ways we can't plan or foresee, to know and respond to others' needs.

Corporate Witness

If asked what is distinctive about Quaker approaches in service, most of us would point out, next to the pacifist basis and the belief in the indwelling Light, the *corporate* nature of our work. Service is undertaken by the whole community of Friends, and decisions are jointly made in accordance with Friends' practices of Meeting for Worship for Business. In Meeting for Worship, few of those present will speak, but those who hold silence undertake as great, or greater a part in holding the Meeting. Likewise in service: the visibly active part may be taken by only a few, but when a concern is carried forward, it is not only *on behalf of* the Meeting, but can in a very real sense be by the Meeting as well. True ministry comes not just when an individual has properly centred down, and has waited in stillness for the Spirit to lead, but when the whole meeting is gathered. It is probably only in that context that the individual can reach the deep stillness. We have all - I hope - experienced what it is to be in a truly gathered Meeting for Worship, where the ministry goes beyond gems of individual insight to form a

whole, of speech and of silence, which is much more than the sum of its parts. Action and service can be similarly experienced: however committed, insightful and resourceful the individuals may be from whom the impetus seems to come to undertake the work for justice, or for relief, it is when the concern is upheld by the Meeting as whole that it can and does move forward in ways that verge on the inexplicable.

The Meaning of 'Concern'

We do bandy the word 'concern' around a lot; in the 1951 Swarthmore Lecture, Roger Wilson went so far as to say the term had "become debased by excessively common usage among Friends." Too often, he said, "it is used to cover merely a strong desire."^{xxxiii} A concern is not someone's good, or even brilliant, idea. Like true verbal Ministry, it is a leading which cannot be denied. Further, it is tested out by the whole Meeting. The person first bringing it forward should be ready to yield and accept the greater light which can come from the gathered body of Friends. As Roger Wilson goes on to say, it is truly a concern when "the Meeting knows, as a matter of inward experience, that here is something the Lord would have done, however obscure the way, however uncertain the means to human observation."^{xxxiv}

Just how does this work out, though, in situations of extremity and crisis, as are those where Friends' work is often carried out? Decisions have to be made fast, by small groups, or individuals, with scant apparent time for reflection and communication. Throughout the history of Friends' work also, there is a clear stream of quite exceptional individual activity. Most of us could probably name several Friends of our immediate acquaintance, whose achievements seem extraordinary. As we've seen in the case of Irish Friends in the great famine, the telling of this is left largely to people outside the Society; from Friends' own records, individual names barely arise. It's a dynamic tension which we can also recognise within the Meeting for Worship: a great value is placed on the ability and responsibility of the individual to respond directly to the Spirit as she or he perceives it; wide differences between individual perceptions of the way in which the Spirit speaks are accepted. The Society does attract strong individualists; some would even say eccentrics. At the same time, there is an equally strong emphasis on yielding - not to the persuasions of the most powerful individual, but to the collective light of the Meeting.

The Experience of Trust

Here I need to draw on my own experience of work overseas with Quaker organisations. Both in Lebanon in the early 1980s and in Cambodia ten years later, I was part of a small group, operating in isolated locations and insecure and threatening circumstances. In each case, we reported to a Committee, based in London or Hobart. At times, this could be very frustrating, and seem quite inefficient. At times, I think it frankly was inefficient, as an urgent request would be sent through to home base, and we'd wait up to three weeks for the Committee to convene, deliberate on the issue, and send an answer back through channels that often didn't work smoothly. (There's a whole saga just in how we got faxes out of Cambodia in 1988; or how the telephone operators in the Moscow exchange we had to go to refused to recognise the existence of Tasmania and the 002 STD code). That is the worst of Quaker process; we can fail to see where the attempt at collective shedding of light may hinder the business, and obscure as much as or more than it clarifies. On the other hand, and especially in my experience with QSA in Cambodia, there were instances where the degree of trust shown towards us was extraordinary, and uplifting. Where quite radical decisions needed to be made fast, we were empowered to do so without referring back to the Committee, which would nonetheless take responsibility for, and ownership of, the consequences. There was properly time and space made for reflection and review afterwards, the better to learn how next to move forward. This manifestation of trust also runs through much of the history of Friends' service - not always evenly, but always there. As we've seen in the Irish famine and elsewhere, Friends never had the numbers or the reach to be everywhere, and to monitor everything. Much of the carrying forward of the concern was left in the hands of isolated Friends, or non-Friends. This does call forward, in the individual or the group, a heightened sense of duty and responsibility, and faithfulness to the Light as it is given, which is perhaps the main reason why this has in nearly all cases worked so well.

The tension between the individual leading and group discernment is a real one, and can be exacerbated in situations of crisis. We are fond of quoting John Woolman and citing his efforts in the struggle against slavery. We need to remind ourselves more often of how he and others like him were for so long outside the consensus of Friends' views of their times, and were felt as a discomfort and a bother. At the same time, we've probably all known instances where a Friend has been utterly and unswervingly convinced of the rightness of his or her views, and

by what we might call force of persuasion or personality has been instrumental in a Meeting deciding to go in a way that later proved a mistake.

It's not an easy task; but working in situations of high tension and occasional danger also gave good object lessons in why Friends' business process is structured as it is. With the QSA team in Cambodia, a small minority (sometimes only one) of the group were Friends, or had experience of Friends' practice. Wherever possible, though, all decisions were made on a basis of unity, in which we tried to move beyond consensus. As the team grew in size, and with it the amount of business to be dealt with, it rapidly became obvious that this did not need to extend every week to the stationery orders, matters of managing ancillary staff, or every item of official correspondence. However, the decisions taken on the ways in which the program needed to move frequently brought us into tension or conflict with powerful individuals, institutions and interests. In these circumstances, feeling that the way forward had been chosen freely by us all was a key to survival as a team, and through it to the carrying forward of the concern originally undertaken. The conduct of the meeting for worship for business was decided at a time when Friends faced persecution: the same persecution occasioning Friends' first work of material relief, as prisoners and their families had to be fed and cared for.

Since those days in Cambodia, I've had the privilege of seeing that work come to fruition. Since Friends first took up the concern for work in Kampuchea, as it then was, there has been an extraordinary degree of upheaval and change in that country. In its economy, political structure and society, it is barely recognisable as the same place where we began work in 1986. None of this could have been foreseen by Friends at the time; fifty years' worth of history were condensed into about five, or so it felt: much of it connected with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which took most of the world by surprise. However, Friends' leadings at that time turn out to have been, in the main, highly effective - maybe not least because we chose to invest and trust in people and their skills. It may be a temptation of pride to suggest that this is therefore firmly proven as a true leading, faithfully followed, but it at least bears further watching. None of this was achieved without real difficulty and pain within the organisation, or in fact conflict at times. Several communications that passed between Phnom Penh and the Committee were terse, to say the least, and in one or two phone conversations at the most fraught times, the language used (at least from my side) was un-Quakerly to say the least. It was a relief to read Roger Wilson's account of the strains on the system in Friends' Second World War relief work:

" ... arising partly from the rub of personality on personality, partly from the different proportions in which different groups saw the same issue, partly because of bad adjustment, incompetent administration and sheer thoughtlessness." ^{xxxv}

All this again at the height of a vast relief operation, which with historical hindsight appears to have been very successful, by any usual measures.

The Role of Quaker Service Organisations

The expectation of dependence for guidance on the will of God can itself be among the sources of tension when more than one person or party feels with utter conviction, that their particular leading is the right one, when rapid resolution is required, and no-one seems ready or able to yield. As Roger Wilson again said of the Second World War experiences, "Running an organisation on love and the will of God is wearing work on all concerned. There is a true peace to be found in it, but it is indeed a peace which the world does not give." ^{xxxvi} I doubt that statement will be seriously contested by anyone who has worked for more than a short time for any Quaker service organisation.

The proverb tells us that we should "Be as wise as the serpent, and as gentle as the dove"; the second part sits naturally with us as pacifists, but doves left to their own devices can seem rather fluffy, ineffectual creatures. The image of the serpent is harder to take as a model for behaviour, particularly in the land of taipans and tiger snakes; but the snake can move deftly around obstacles; slip through cracks where others see a blank wall, lie still and camouflage, and otherwise show that the shortest distance between two points is not always a straight line. The best operations have been those where Friends have brought to bear real management acumen, and quite adroit political manoeuvring, and those whose examples we admire most Mahatma Gandhi, John Woolman to name just two - were particularly good at this. We are commanded to use all the gifts we are given, and wilful naivete is not an expression of love.

This brings us to the particular phenomenon of Quaker service organisations. Often, when we talk of Quaker service, we tend to endow it with capital letters, identifying it with Quaker Service Australia, Quaker Peace & Service, American Friends' Service Committee, and all the other 'Q' and 'F' acronyms. It's important to remember for how little of our 350 years of history as a Society these or other such bodies have existed. AFSC is, I believe, the oldest,

with slightly more than eighty years on the clock. For the first three hundred years, the response was made by committees set up at the time, with or without the endorsement of the relevant Yearly Meeting. There was a continuity John Ormerod Greenwood notes that the particular Friends who organised a very effective relief operation in the wake of the Napoleonic wars in Germany had a long history of working together in the campaign against slavery and on other social causes. Similar threads are no doubt present in many other places. One of the constraints in my research has been not having time or opportunity to find out just when, how and why different branches of Quakerism chose to set up standing bodies for relief and service, but it certainly appears to be part of the larger social and economic trends within which we necessarily move. The twentieth century part of it especially has seen the professionalisation of welfare at all levels, and the establishment of complex structures to manage it. Compared to most, Quaker organisations are small and streamlined, and, despite our foibles, efficient.

The history of QSA in the last twenty years is illustrative. It has grown from a purely voluntary committee, of which one member for several years worked virtually full-time unpaid, to having an office with paid staff. This was tiny in comparison to most other development NGOs, but large in proportion to Australia Yearly Meeting, as the realities of dealing with large amounts of funding, especially from government, were brought home to us. And latterly, we have experienced the difficult transition all the way back to a volunteer-based structure once more. The shift from Tasmania to Sydney, though it makes absolute sense in terms of the way Quakers run their concerns, totally bewildered officialdom. The kinds of work we have undertaken across that time have changed radically. Going back to the example of Cambodia, I really doubt that even the most foresighted of those Friends involved would have predicted in 1986, when work was first taken up, that five years later we'd be running the largest Australian aid project in the whole country. When I first went to teach in 1988, I didn't see myself attending diplomatic cocktail parties, as the closest approximation to an official Australian presence there was in the country at the time of the embargo (I did go by bicycle).

'Small is beautiful' is not necessarily an article of faith for Friends. Though we did, for a small Society, take a major risk in tackling such a huge task, this is part of living adventurously, and should not to automatically be avoided on those grounds. Some of the difficulties, and the real pain we have since faced in deciding where and how QSA should go emanate from that decision, as far as I can see. With the bias of one who was able to gather a huge wealth of personal

experience from the undertaking, I still feel the decision was right, and the concern was a true leading.

And it does, perhaps paradoxically, seem hugely reassuring to see how the discussion and seeking have since proceeded, however painfully at times, in going back to the very fundamentals of what we expect our own Quaker Service body to be, and how it will best carry our concerns forward. At several points in such records as are kept of Quaker undertakings, the writers speak of the seductions and temptations of being seen by the outside world as a successful institution. This was the learning of Friends in Ireland in 1849, in not taking the role ascribed to them as efficient deliverers of relief within a profoundly unjust system.

There is a possible irony in that Quakers have set up specific institutions of service just at the same time as many of the practices Quakers brought to relief and service have been 'mainstreamed'. For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Quakers stood out as consistently responding to incidents of war, displacement and famine, when most of the plethora of relief organisations whose names and logos we now see on our TV screens didn't exist. It was a combination of the particular calling Friends felt to work with those suffering, and the flexibility of the Society's structure, as well as the relative affluence of many of its members, that meant they were nearly always there on the spot. Since World War II especially, specialised relief organisations have mushroomed in size and number: Oxfam, Save the Children, CARE, to name but a few. We can reasonably safely claim that the work done by Friends up until then, and particularly their consistent advocacy on behalf of those suffering, was a significant factor in creating the climate in which these organisations came into being.

Awareness has developed from relief work in times of immediate crisis, of the underlying injustices within the societies where the disaster or conflict is taking place, and these same, or other organisations, have begun work on local community development, both for the immediate alleviation of poverty, and to mobilise against its root causes. In all of this work, for disaster relief and for long-term justice, when it is done at its best, we see the same principles and practices in evidence as were followed by Irish Friends 150 years ago: efficient and businesslike mobilisation; reliance on and trust in local people and structures to carry forward the work on the ground; strict accountability for the resources entrusted; and an analysis and strategy which addresses the causes, as well as the symptoms. Non-Quaker organisations have often developed the principles and practices further, to the point where Quaker organisations have been able to learn and grow from others' experience.

Friends and Civil Society

Not coincidentally, many of the newer relief and development organizations were founded by Friends, either solely or as part of a group, or by people who'd been demonstrably influenced by Quaker thought and practice. The list is a long one: Oxfam, both in Great Britain and several other countries; Save the Children; Action Aid; YSO, and several more. This acknowledgement carries the usual danger of making us smug. When I was researching material for this lecture, two Friends passed on to me a list prepared by an American Friend of all kinds of organizations, mainly in North America, where Quakers or Quaker-influenced people played a key role.^{xxxvii} There are 184 of them, running from Amnesty International and Greenpeace through the League of Women Voters, Grandmothers for Peace, the AIDS Quilt Project to the Grey Panthers, the London Bach Society and the National Baseball Association. The compiler says the list is far from exhaustive, and she did not even attempt to list Australian, or most British organizations. As she herself emphatically says the purpose of the list is not to allow ourselves to pat ourselves on the back arrest on our laurels, but to think of the gift of empowerment we have been given, and how best we may further use it.

When you stop to think of it, there is every reason why Quakers *should* be playing such a key role, prominently or (preferably) in the background, in these and myriad other bodies, down to local committees and associations. The whole structure of the Society stresses both the value of individual insight and leadings, and the responsibility for acting on them, without waiting for a voice of authority to permit or direct. At the same time, it teaches us - where we are prepared to learn - ways of working together as equals; preparedness to let go of our own stance for the larger good; willingness to listen as well as speak, and to share responsibility for all the tasks undertaken by the body. All of these principles and practices are fundamental to what is termed civil society - the great range of community organization which lies in the space between government and individual private life. Friends should not so much applaud themselves for how they have, individually and together, taken a share in what is best and most progressive in this. We ought rather, with the gifts we have been given, be ashamed of ourselves if we'd done less. If we go back to the gospel parable of the talents, in this particular area, we look like the servant who was handed the pile of ten at the beginning of the day, through no particular virtue of our own, and we are called to give account. And we should perhaps remember that many of the

things we take greatest pride in, we sometimes do particularly badly, or see 'Quaker' practice far better modelled by people who've never heard of the Society of Friends.

This is also a good point at which to recall that, even in organizations specifically run by Friends, a majority of our colleagues and collaborators are usually non-Friends. We are not an enclosed order; part of our witness has always been to enable the working of the Light as it is given to everyone. Their presence does not necessarily mean a dilution of Quaker witness, and can / should be a prompt to Friends to properly model the way our beliefs are lived.

And we need to keep re-learning the lessons. In among the most successful undertakings of the 20th century, there are several points at which Quakers got it badly wrong, to their own and others' cost. Some Friends' legitimate concern over the punitive measures taken against Germany after World War I led them to downplay early reports of Nazi atrocities, as slander against a victimized nation.^{xxxviii} Quakers have more than once been thrust onto the international stage, having, by force of circumstance, been the only body of people able to mediate, or who were trusted by two opposing parties. This at one stage led to a proposal to establish Quaker 'embassies' in many places throughout the world. It is a horrible mistake to believe that we have a permanent endowment of wisdom among us, to be readily applied in any situation of conflict or need arising. Where Friends have contributed something of value in service or peacemaking on the public stage, it has been the fruit of years or decades of toil in mundane matters; of keeping faith in many difficult human relationships over time; applying themselves meticulously and constantly to maintain precise and nuanced knowledge of a particular situation; and waiting constantly and silently on the Spirit.

The call to be mindful can come in unexpected ways. Some Friends in Melbourne were sifting through archival materials, in part to help me with research for this lecture, when they discovered records of Friends' work in the 1930s with refugees from the Spanish Civil War and Franco's regime. Around the same time, a query came from Friends in Sydney, who'd been contacted by a man who had been helped by Quakers as a child refugee from Spain. He'd suffered from TB, and Friends had arranged for treatment, when in occupied France, he and his family, like other Spanish Republicans, stood in danger. He wanted to leave money to the Quaker organization responsible for this; which he believed had saved his life. As a reminder, this is welcome because our own records purposely refrain from playing up the good work achieved; but it should also serve to tell us that what is being given to us is not for the work done 60 years

ago, nor yet by virtue of who we are now, but in the expectation that now and in the future, we will act from the same basis, and take the same risks - real enough for some Friends in France in the 1930s - as was done then, whatever new situation may present itself We should be careful not to fall back on reciting the list of past achievements: John Woolman did this; James Backhouse did this; Lucretia Mott did this; but Friend, what canst *thou* do?

Conclusion

Most of us will have heard the anecdote of the newcomer to Quaker meeting, who sat for several minutes perplexed by the silence and apparent lack of activity, before turning to his neighbour and whispering audibly, "When does the service begin?" To which the ministry came from across the room "The service begins when the meeting ends." In the end, though, the distinction between the meeting and service may be a mistake. The meeting is, or should be, at the core of all our service. The sense of being upheld by the Meeting in difficult and dangerous places has been a very real and tangible one for many of us, as has the sense of the working of a collective, centred wisdom greater than any individual, committee or team can aspire to. Turning sincerely towards the Light, and accepting the light as it shines through others, is maybe the basic act of service. Even when no apparent action arises from it, it means we offer ourselves as ready to take on whatever action is needed.

One of the last times I heard Lydie Hooper minister in Friends' House Meeting in Melbourne, towards the end of her very long life, was when she quoted from the sixth chapter of the book of Micah:

"And what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

I think all we mean by service can be found in that: To act justly means we apply our whole selves to seeking justice for those who are oppressed and suffering - that we hunger and thirst after righteousness. To love mercy requires the quality of forgiveness, of others and ourselves, and accepting all human beings as worthy of love. Walking humbly with our God means being open to the Spirit, which bloweth where it listeth following our leadings with trust, even when the way ahead is not clear beyond the next few paces.

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- [iv] *Ibid*, p1
- [v] *Ibid*, dedication
- [vi] Central Relief Committee *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends in Ireland during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847*_(Facsimile version) Edmund Burke, Dublin 1996, p31
- [vii] *Ibid*, p31
- [viii] *Ibid*, p55
- [ix] Greenwood, op.cit p241
- [x] *Transactions*, p37
- [xi] *Ibid*, p439
- [xii] *Ibid*, p439
- [xiii] *Ibid*, p55
- [xiv] *Ibid*, p100
- [xv] *Ibid*, p168
- [xvi] *Ibid*, p9
- [xvii] *Ibid*, p220
- [xviii] *Ibid*, p230
- [xix] *Ibid*, p3
- [xx] *Ibid*, p452
- [xxi] *Ibid*, p453
- [xxii] *Ibid*, p454
- [xxiii] *Ibid*, p445
- [xxiv] *Ibid*, p6
- [xxv] *Ibid*, p449
- [xxvi] *Ibid*, p159
- [xxvii] Quoted in Roger Wilson. *Authority. Leadership and Concern*. op cit
- [xxviii] *Ibid*, p ix
- [xxix] John Ormerod Greenwood. *Quaker Encounters*_op cit, p 81
- [xxx] *Ibid*, p49
- [xxxi] John Ormerod Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters Vol II. Vines on the Mountains*. Sessions of York 1978, Chapter III

- [xxxii] Roger C. Wilson, *Quaker Relief*, op cit
 [xxxiii] Roger C Wilson, *Authority, Leadership and Concern* op cit p12
 [xxxiv] Ibid, p13
 [xxxv] Ibid, p51
 [xxxvi] Ibid, p51
 [xxxvii] *Twentieth Century Organisations Founded by Quakers*,_(Unpublished)
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 [xxxviii] John Ormerod Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters Vol 1*, op cit, p 260

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