

From Eco-Activists to Anarchist Allies, Quakers Are Redefining What it Means to be Christian



PHOTO: Environmental activist Lisa Wriley says she's found 'kindred spirits' within the Quaker community. (ABC RN: Siobhan Hegarty)

What do Cadbury, Clarks Shoes and Greenpeace have in common? They were all founded by Quakers. The Christian faith known as the Religious Society of Friends — or, more colloquially, as Quakerism — was founded in the 1650s in north England by the activist George Fox. Unimpressed by what he saw as a disconnect between Christian values and the behaviour of the Church, Fox established a faith based upon equality, social justice and pacifism. It may sound like a peaceful endeavour, but the religion and its rule-breaking followers were far too progressive for the 17th century establishment. Fox's non-hierarchical views were particularly controversial. He believed that anyone could have a relationship with God, making churches and clergy dispensable. Between 1662 and 1670, it's estimated 6,000 Quakers were imprisoned for various crimes, including refusing to swear an oath in court or remove their headwear before a magistrate. The Religious Society of Friends is no longer persecuted, but Quakers can still be characterised by non-conformity and commitment to peaceful rebellion.

'We have that rebellious spirit'

There are fewer than 1,700 Quakers in Australia, as captured in the 2016 Census results. Central Coast mother-of-two and waste campaigner Lisa Wriley (photo above and below) is one of them. She formally joined the Friends in 2014, but has worked with Quakers on social justice campaigns since the early 90s. Ms Wriley says most of the Quakers she knows are politically active.



PHOTO: Lisa Wriley is known for donning her 'Bev the Bottle' suit when campaigning to reduce waste. (Supplied: Lisa Wriley)

"Whether they're part of the Knitting Nannas Against Gas or the Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children or at the Adani protests, I don't know many Quakers who couldn't also be considered activists," she says. "I think we have that rebellious spirit and aren't afraid to question the way things are." Over the years, the Australian Quaker community has called on the government to end offshore detention of refugees, legislate on same-sex marriage and support the Uluru Statement from the Heart. "I think Quakerism is more relevant than ever and I often lament that we're not very good at telling people about who we are, what we do and how they're welcome to join us," Ms Wriley laughs. "It's just not been part of Quaker practice, that whole sort of proselytising thing. "But at demonstrations, we are getting a bit better at having signs that say: 'Quakers'."



PHOTO: As pacifists, Quakers in Australia and the US were very vocal against the Vietnam War. (Getty images: Bettmann)

Silent worship, sans clergy

It's not just its commitment to social activism that sets this Christian faith apart. The Society of Friends does not have "churches" but rather "meeting houses", in which worshippers gather for silent meeting in lieu of religious services. Practices vary between regions, but attendees generally sit in a large circle and only speak when they feel compelled to. They may reflect on a spiritual sentiment, or even a political one. There are no clergy, no songs, and no sermons. The only role is the 'clerk of the meeting', who looks after the logistics of running the meeting house. "It is a totally different experience to worshipping in all the other churches because of the stillness and the silence and that you just don't have the hierarchy of leadership," Ms Wriley says.

Sweet like chocolate

Tim Sowerbutts is what Quakers call a "birthright Friend". He was born into the faith, after his parents converted from Anglicanism and Presbyterianism. "My parents couldn't agree about a way to get married, so they took the default option to both leave their own churches and get married in a Friends meeting," he says. "They were both pacifists and so that took them into the world of meeting Quakers."



PHOTO: Tim Sowerbutts says Quakers' democratic approach can be at odds with social hierarchies. (ABC RN: Siobhan Hegarty)

Mr Sowerbutts's parents migrated from northern England to Hobart after World War II. The Tasmanian city was home to a strong Quaker community, as the Cadbury family — members of the Religious Society of Friends — had established their chocolate factory there 30-odd years before. Quakers and the chocolate trade

Mr Sowerbutts says that Cadbury's, like many other Quaker-run companies, actually stemmed from religious persecution. "One of the reasons Quakers got into business was because they were restricted from becoming a member of the profession," he explains. "They weren't going to swear allegiance to the king, so they couldn't go to a university and become a lawyer or an engineer. "All the chocolate firms started off as Quaker — Cadbury's, Fry's and Pascal's. Barclay's Bank was originally a Quaker firm, so was Friends Mutual, a big insurance company, and Clarks Shoes."



PHOTO: The establishment of the Cadbury's factory in Tasmania brought many English Quakers to Australia. (Supplied: Archives Office of Tasmania)

When Anarchism met Quakerism

The historical influence of Quakers can be seen beyond commercial enterprises. Mr Sowerbutts says many travelled to Spain during the civil war of the 1930s to act as ambulance drivers and help the victims of the war. "They were very sympathetic to the non-Franco forces, because the aspect of Quakerism which means there's no central leader or authority is rather familiar to Spanish anarchism," he says. Eventually Franco and his authoritarian regime won the war, but a Quaker contingent remained. The only problem was that meetings of five or more people were banned, making religious worship rather tricky. So, the Spanish Quakers took their faith to the streets. "These half-a-dozen or so people would have a walking meeting, which didn't offend Mr Franco's prohibition on sit-down meetings," he says.

Theologically conservative, socially progressive

According to Mr Sowerbutts, who has visited Friends communities across the world, one of the most fascinating Quaker groups can be found in the Southern USA. "The Friends are theologically conservative, but not socially conservative," he explains. "They are very biblio-centric, very

Christian-centric, they are quoting verses from the Bible all the time. "But at the same time, there are [Quaker] farmers organising very dangerous and risky rescues of Central American refugees, bringing them across the border at enormous personal risk to themselves." Given that this Christian faith was rooted in rebellion from its inception, perhaps it's no surprise that Quaker are pushing boundaries all over the world.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-05/from-eco-activists-to-anarchist-allies-meet-the-quakers/11078036>