

# Quakers and simplicity



## The testimonies

Quaker testimonies bear witness to truth, equality, peace, community and simplicity. A testimony is neither a rule nor a creed. It is both an ideal to strive for and a way for our lives to speak. No testimony stands alone. They are like threads which we weave in and out of each other to create the material of our lives.

## The simplicity testimony now

Most Quakers in Australia, Europe and North America are part of the global wealthy elite. However, we are aware of gross inequalities in the world between rich and poor, and that dishonesty and violence are inextricably entangled with this.

Friends have a consciousness and energy conducive to healthy change. We are aware that spiritual poverty exists within affluent societies and that we need to nurture our own spirituality and to reach out to others.

The rising level of consumption in affluent societies is more than the planet can sustain. In the past 50 years the need for us, both as individuals and as a species, to have a loving and sustainable relationship with the earth has become a major issue for Friends. Is recognition of this the evolution of an environmental testimony, or does it follow from the testimony of simplicity?

## Inward simplicity

Quakers accept that we experience the universal spirit of love and creativity in different ways. 'To live in the presence of God', 'to walk in the Light', 'to flow with the Spirit of creation' are different ways of expressing that experience.

If we believe that we can put our whole lives under the guidance of the spirit then our priority will be to let go of inner 'clutter' so that we have the emotional and mental space to be open to these leadings.

Such simplicity needs perseverance, courage to be and willingness to change. It is nourished by connection with 'our true inner self' (that of God within), by connection with others, and by connection with the earth.

In silent communal worship, Friends find a space of peace and simplicity where we are all equal and truth can become plain.



## Outward simplicity

Simple living asks us to share more and to understand how our lives affect the planet.

Each of us must discern what steps to take towards living simply when the culture around us is encouraging us in the opposite direction. The support of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) can help us as we struggle to swim against the tide.

We can car-pool, think more carefully about how we spend our money, grow organic vegetables, spend more time in the bush, organise to challenge the economics of consumerism, devote more time and energy to our families, develop daily spiritual practices. Such activities deepen our connections with our inner self, with God, with others, and with the earth.

*I understand that living the simplicity testimony means – to decide to walk in the light; to make this a constant priority, a simple (though hard) priority. Each person's experience of making this decision will be different and we will all have different answers to similar choices in our life.*

Jenny Spinks, 'Quakers and their Simplicity Testimony in 2000', available at: <https://www.quakersaustralia.info/testimonies>



## History of the simplicity testimony in Britain

In the past simplicity was associated with a puritanical or priggish show of 'plainness', so Friends today are cautious about our simplicity testimony and what it may mean to embrace it.

Early Friends were persecuted and imprisoned, and many died for their conviction that all people can be guided directly by God, by 'the Christ within', by their inner light. Living in the spirit was, for them, expressed in the simplicity of their faith and practice. In less than 40 years 60,000 people became Quakers; they risked everything for that direct communion with God. When they celebrated the light within themselves, and opened themselves to the light of others, they saw the need to live simply and truthfully as equals.

In the late 1680s, as the second generation of Friends took leadership, they began to interpret simplicity in a narrow way. They emphasised the need for outward demonstration of Quaker simplicity by dressing 'plainly' (in grey). But 'outward things may be easily done', as Margaret Fox warned them in her late eighties: 'it's the spirit that gives life'.

Her foreboding was accurate. The Religious Society of Friends defined itself with strict conformity for nearly 200 years. Only in the 1860s did 'Simplicity' first appear as a heading in the Society's 'books of discipline'.\* At the same

time strict adherence to plainness was abandoned. In 1911 and 1919 London Yearly Meeting discussed the simplicity testimony with greater confidence, but not until 1959 did a book of discipline include Margaret Fox's plea that, rather than adopting a mere costume of simplicity, 'it is more fit for us to be clothed with God's Eternal Spirit and clothed with his Eternal Light'.

*The testimony of outward simplicity began as a protest against the extravagance and snobbery which marked English society in the 1600s. In whatever forms this protest is maintained today, it must still be seen as a testimony against involvement with things which tend to dilute our energies and scatter our thoughts, reducing us to lives of triviality and mediocrity.*

**'Faith and practice', North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), 1983**

\*An old name for compilations which Quakers publish at intervals for mutual guidance. In Australia Yearly Meeting we have a book about Quaker faith and practice entitled *this we can say* (2003) and a *Handbook of Practice and Procedure* (revised 2005).

### ADDITIONAL READING

*Reflections on simplicity*, E. Prevallet, 1982, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 244.

*Plain living: a Quaker path to simplicity*, C. Whitmore, 2001, Sorin Books Simple Living Network.

*Support for our true selves – Nurturing the space where leadings flow*, J. Spinks, 2007, Backhouse Lecture, Australia Yearly Meeting.

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