



A short history of Canadian Friends Service Committee

Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC) is a standing committee of Canadian Yearly Meeting. The Service Committee was established in 1931 before union and represented service work of Friends in Canada across the divisions. In 1955, it became the peace and social justice committee of the new Canadian Yearly Meeting, incorporating projects already in existence. The strength and experience which came from participation in Friends' wartime and post-war relief and witness brought fresh impetus to the work of the Committee. Younger Friends and newcomers who had done Quaker service abroad as conscientious objectors in relief, reconstruction and ambulance work, along with Friends from other Yearly Meetings, participated in the work with concern and enthusiasm. In 1947, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) received the Nobel Peace Prize for its service work during war. All of the Service Committees work is honoured by the Prize and the ethics that garnered it continue to inform our work today.

For more than 70 years, the concerns, witness and projects of CFSC, along with their inherent challenges, have enriched the life of Yearly Meeting. Because Quakers recognize that a concern is "that leading of the Holy Spirit which may not be denied", they have supported service projects, peace witness and education. The projects supported are not solely philanthropic or humanitarian, but work which expresses a religiously-based approach to the life of our times.

In the decade beginning in 1963, CFSC operated a Friends Peace Education Centre on Grindstone Island, south of Ottawa, providing imaginative peace and reconciliation programmes for Canadian Friends and many others concerned about working for peace. Programmes included training in non-violence, French-English dialogue, conferences for diplomats and Quaker-UNESCO seminars organized by the Canadian Peace Research Institute. During the Vietnam war many war and draft resisters came to Canada from the United States. Some of these participated in Grindstone Island programmes; some were assisted by Quaker Meetings, individual Friends and families; and some settled in Canada and became Friends.

At this time, CFSC sent medical aid to Vietnam to be used by victims on all sides of the conflict in accordance with Friends' tradition of relief work which cuts across the boundaries of war and conflict. Many American Friends knowingly contravened U.S. law by contributing to this work through Canadian Friends. For some the programme was controversial, but for many it was a labour of love in war-time. It provided considerable aid to the sufferers and served as a witness against war.

During the 1950s and 1960s, two families of Canadian Friends served at the Friends Rural Centre, Rasulia, India. This project, supported by CFSC and Friends Service Council (now Quaker Peace and Social Witness) in London, was important for the growing sense of family among Friends in Canada. By the 1970s the development work that Canadian Friends had done personally in Rasulia changed to financial support for a larger number of small projects in collaboration with other development agencies, later including the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). CFSC now supports small but imaginative projects in keeping with Friends' testimonies and values in Asia, Latin America and Africa. A recent project supports local Quaker agencies in Africa working on post-conflict peacebuilding and alternatives to violence.

Friends have traditionally had a concern for the rights of Aboriginal peoples. In 1974 individual Friends at Yearly Meeting were led to go to Kenora in Northern Ontario to attempt reconciliation in a confrontation over mercury contamination of the waterways. Shortly afterwards, a Friend who was a physician went there to treat Aboriginal people suffering from mercury poisoning and to document the problem. The Quaker Committee on Native Concerns (now Quaker Aboriginal Affairs Committee) was born out of this work and other concerns, especially amongst Friends in western Canada. Since then the Committee has supported Aboriginal community building initiatives, and urged governments to live up to their legal commitments to Aboriginal communities including Esgeenoopetitj (Burnt Church) in New Brunswick, Pimicikamac Cree Nation in northern Manitoba and the Lubicon in northern Alberta. Much of the work of this Committee has been done in collaboration with the Aboriginal Rights Coalition which is now part of KAIROS, the ecumenical justice agency. More recently, QAAC has been working with others at the United Nations to develop international standards for Aboriginal Rights.

In 1972, with strong support of Toronto Friends, CFSC established the Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice (QCJJ) which over the years has worked to encourage prison visiting, sought alternatives to prisons and fostered awareness of the roots of crime and violence in society. This committee has worked hard in promoting restorative justice and has supported the Alternatives to Violence Project. In 1981 Canadian Yearly Meeting minuted: "Prison abolition is both a process and a long-term goal. In the interim there is a great need for Friends to reach out and to support all those affected: guards, prisoners, victims, and families. We recognize a need for restraint of those few who are exhibiting dangerous behaviour. The kind of restraint used and the help offered during that time must reflect our concern for that of God in every person."

In 2001 CFSC became legally incorporated. This step was driven in part by the realization that individual employees were otherwise unprotected from serious legal liability and by the desire to continue partnerships with other organizations (such as the Canadian International Development Agency) which require incorporation if they are to support CFSC projects. A great deal of care was taken to ensure that the legal obligations of incorporation do not conflict with the spiritual understanding and practices of Friends or the position of CFSC as a committee of Canadian Yearly Meeting.

CFSC structure and staffing has evolved to reflect its work. In addition to its committee of 22 volunteers, CFSC has six paid employees. Its standing committees are: Quaker Peace and Sustainable Communities Committee, Quakers Fostering Justice (formerly QCJJ), and Quaker Aboriginal Affairs Committee. Some of the staff offices are located in the homes of Friends in Mission, BC (QFJ), Guelph, ON (QAAC) and Ottawa, ON (QPASCC). In 2001 a Quaker International Affairs Program was established in Ottawa, building on earlier work in facilitating dialogue in international affairs, such as Quaker Peacemakers and the diplomats' conferences held at Grindstone in the 1960s. It works in collaboration with the Quaker United Nations Offices based in Geneva and New York and relates to diplomats, government officials, and international non-governmental organizations.

(Adapted from entry 1.8 in Canadian Yearly Meeting's Organization and Procedure.)

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