

Being a
Quaker,
Being an
Activist



QUAKERS

Canadian Friends
Service Committee

“The main thing is the belief that there’s not much point in faith without work. You put into practice what you believe.”
—Betty Peterson when asked about Quakerism¹

“Can mystics build or improve civilization? Words change the world, but only silence changes us. Any reform that is not born of silence will be short lived.”—Pablo D’Ors²

This resource provides advice on being a Quaker activist. For a list of peace and social justice campaigns that Canadian Friends Service Committee currently supports that you may wish to get involved with, visit <https://QuakerService.ca/Campaigns>.

CFSC also makes grants available to members and regular attenders of Quaker meetings who have peace or social justice leadings: <https://QuakerService.ca/Grants>.

Introduction

This resource examines what it means to be not just an activist, but a *Quaker* activist. How is Friends' activism balanced by, and grounded in, silence, contemplation, and Friendly approaches?

Friends often feel called to serve as patterns and examples in the world, to offer living witness and engage in transformative action. Friends have developed testimonies, which are not meant as mere beliefs or creeds but actions in the world, arising from spiritual insight. The testimonies are seen by many as indispensable guides: "Testimony is a key defence against all the tendencies in contemporary life which split faith and action—precisely because it is faith-in-action."³ However the testimonies can easily become just an over-simplification of what it means to live faithfully as a Quaker.⁴ And Friends are frequently reluctant to accept limiting definitions of what it is to be a Friend or how Friends should behave.

Over centuries, many Quakers have been deeply involved in social change work that seeks just peace—a dynamic peace grounded in the Spirit, the freeing up of all people to reach their fullest potential in harmony with one another and the earth.

At the same time, many Friends do not experience leadings toward such outer work in the world, and are drawn solely toward Quaker worship. There can arise division between those of a more "activist" and those of a more "mystic" orientation within Meetings.

For activists, those Friends who appear unwilling to involve themselves with social causes can seem to be part of the broader violent and oppressive culture of comforts and privileges that instils hidden biases, complacency, and fears of speaking out.

For mystics, activists may seem to detract from the spiritual

grounding of the Meeting with calls to action that are too frequent, hurried, or zealous.

It may be useful to think of these as not truly two camps, or ones with incompatible needs.

When worshipful discernment is practiced, many seeming divisions may turn into creative sources of nourishment for Meetings. Other apparent tensions and contradictions may fall away entirely.⁵

The goal of just peace—peace that gives full expression to all of Friends’ testimonies and spiritual yearnings—may be shared and held by all, even as Friends bring very different understandings of this goal and what it demands. British Friend and activist Helen Steven, speaking about a Catholic nun who offered to pray for her activist group, wrote:

Most of us never met her, but she wanted to know whenever we were doing an action or had an important decision to make, so that she could uphold us in prayer. I believe it strengthened our group in unseen ways, and I also believe strongly that her prayers were as valid a form of activism as our demonstrations and protests, but that one without the complimentary activity of the other has an inherent weakness and lack of balance.⁶

While some Friends are busy developing campaigns, others will seek to live out their concern for just peace by working to change their communication dynamics, by sharing seeds from their gardens, and so many other creative ways of caring for each other.

A persistent truth about Quaker activism

Somehow, the elderly Black female cashier at McDonald’s

could see the potential for good in the tattoo-covered neo-Nazi standing in front of her. Spotting the swastika tattoo on Michaelis' middle finger, she looked at him and said, 'I know you're a better person than that. That's not who you are.' Michaelis ran out of there and never went back. 'The purpose of that tattoo was to flip my middle finger with the swastika at people so they'd be frozen like a deer in the headlights,' he says. 'But when she met my hate with such compassion, I couldn't fight back.'

We can be fairly sure that the cashier in this story despises neo-Nazi ideology. But rather than attacking the man before her—as would have been quite understandable—she looked deeper and found tremendous power that didn't require violent force. It was precisely because she refused to be alienated by the young man that she was able to have such a positive impact on his life.

A few simple and clear words reached his own inner sense that a false ideology had consumed him and cut him off from the goodness in him. Although the story does not say she was a Quaker, the cashier's approach is beautifully resonant with that of successful Quaker change makers—activists and elders alike.

The focus on inner conditions, on listening expectantly and being moved by the Light, is central in the lives of Friends, whether "activists" or "mystics." This is an essential feature that sets Quaker activism apart from most secular approaches.

It's a bold claim that anything can consistently be said about Friends' activism. But it seems as close to a continual truth as possible to say that Friendly activism seeks to reach that of God in all people.

The cashier overcame any fears she might have felt and expressed Truth and Love even though the neo-Nazi had done nothing to "deserve" it. And importantly, as is so often the case, her power here was slow-acting. This was one moment that started a long process that eventually led Arno Michaelis out of his hateful life and to discover a spiritual path and attempt to

make amends for all of the violence he'd inflicted.

Just observing that one interaction in McDonalds, it would have appeared that nothing was achieved. Most personal and social change work takes time. Worship can help us to remain grounded and committed to being patterns and examples even during slow and challenging processes. Without worship to ground and orient peace work, it's all too easy to get discouraged or lose one's way.

Friends differ in how they think it best to reach that of God in another person. But respect and genuine listening seem indispensable. Approaches to activism that are mostly based on shaming, isolating, dehumanizing, or other forms of aggression (trying to cause harm) toward individuals can be successful in some cases and may show more immediate results. Over the longer-term, however, a wealth of evidence shows that such techniques are weaker and cause more resistance, conflict escalation, and entrenchment.⁸

Speaking to that of God, on the other hand, means helping to bring out the other party's "best self" as Friend Jack Ross put it.⁹ Jack was fond of using humour and clowning in his activism—recognizing that joy can be a revolutionary force. The well-timed use of balloons or a joke (one that doesn't try to humiliate) can create a gap in tensions. This moment allows the other party's best self to shine through.

Jack called for activists to be clear on their objectives and never make activism about personal victories (to embarrass or frustrate an opponent). Activism, he reminded us, is about the bigger picture (to help improve whatever situation you're working on). This means separating what the person has done (their actions) from who they are (a unique human being). The problem is never who they are. Friendly activism can strongly oppose actions or policies but is clear in not opposing human beings.

If you seek to engage in Friendly activism but discover that you cannot bring yourself to genuinely respect someone whose actions you oppose—to see the humanity in them and fully

listen to them—that’s an important sign that your activism is fragile. In such a case more worship, a clearness committee, or discussing your situation with a Friend may help to open the knots of fear, outrage, or other feelings that keep you from fully connecting with that of God in others.

Sammy Rangel, a former violent gang member who now dedicates his life to helping people leave extremist groups, offers the important reminder that listening to people doesn’t mean agreeing with them or conceding that they’re factually correct. He notes, though, that in his many years of working with very troubled and difficult people, “What’s amazing is that when you listen, they actually calm down and listen in return.”¹⁰

Common tensions Quaker activists face

Certainty and openness

Activists have to feel confident that the course of action they propose is the best one, otherwise they wouldn’t struggle for it. At the same time, all humans are highly susceptible to many biases and the information we’re aware of is always incomplete.¹¹ This regularly leads well-meaning people to cause harms, usually unintentionally. Even when trying to build just peace, we may make matters worse. Openness to self-reflection and learning, especially through listening to voices outside of those you already agree with, can help to deepen and strengthen your activism.

Purity

One survey in the US found that social justice advocates self-reported feeling more pressure to conform to their groups than did any other political segment (even those on the far-right).¹² At times this goes to extremes, exhausting activists with in-fighting and weakening social change movements. Groupthink can result, where people don’t have the space to discuss different tactics and approaches for fear they’ll be “called out.”

Many have described such a stifling culture of policing fellow activists' every word and deed.¹³

Friends' activism can absorb these trends from the broader culture. Friends do well to know this in advance and counteract it. In the 1800s there were attempts to maintain strict purity through frequently disowning members from Quaker Meetings for various infractions. Today most Friends wouldn't consider that a trend worth repeating. Movements for change are strengthened by a healthy degree of diversity (which includes a diversity of viewpoints) and by remaining open to new Light.

Focus and theory of change

In 1939 Friend Horace Alexander saw the brutal violence around him in Europe and worked for just peace. In doing so, he explained that since war "involves the mobilization of all the human and material resources of the State, it is hardly possible for any citizen to keep clear of all entanglements. Each of us must draw the line somewhere, with charity towards those who for reasons that we may not appreciate draw it elsewhere."¹⁴

Finding where to draw the line has only gotten more challenging in the years since. The Jain religion has taken nonharm (ahimsa) to its farthest reaches, with some members carefully brushing the ground before taking each step so as not to accidentally kill any tiny beings. But with microscopes we now know that even the strictest Jain kills innumerable bacteria every time she washes her hands, and if she doesn't wash her hands, she herself will die. Life depends on some amount of destruction.

Even pacifists who sincerely oppose violence make some use of supply chains that are full of it. If we have phones or computers, we use conflict minerals that come to us with brutality in their wake. And we participate in vastly unequal societies that perpetuate slow violence against some members more than others—"a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space."¹⁵

As an activist, self-righteous outrage can feel necessary to get

people to “wake up” to your cause. At a Canadian Friends Service Committee event nonviolent strategist and author Rivera Sun described this as the “if we shout louder people will listen” theory of how change happens.¹⁶

To counteract this often ineffective theory, it’s helpful to remember Horace Alexander’s insight. There are an infinite number of possible causes and injustices that your activism could focus on, and you yourself will never work on or be aware of even a tiny fraction of them. So try to be generous when interpreting why someone hasn’t taken up your cause. Each of us is drawing the line somewhere.¹⁷

Because our world is so interconnected, any analysis of a problem will have to artificially reduce that problem. We must choose where to place the boundaries with our preferred theories of what’s going on and how to respond. The theory of how we believe change will happen is called a “theory of change.” What is your theory of change? Articulate it in one or more if ____ then ____ sentences.

For example: “If we draw enough media attention to the issue of Saudi Arabia using Canadian weapons to commit war crimes in Yemen, then Canadians will pressure the government to stop selling weapons to Saudi Arabia.” This theory focuses heavily on the roles of the media and the Canadian public. It’s only one possible theory for a campaign against Canada’s selling arms to Saudi Arabia. It makes multiple assumptions that your group could discuss and research. It’s also very generic, expressing no details about who the decision makers are or what influences them. Knowing these details may strengthen your activism by changing which tactics you decide on.

Active nonviolence is regularly misunderstood and so unrealistic theories of change abound. Aggression and violence are repeatedly found in entertainment media, and the few news media portrayals of nonviolent activism tend to focus only on attention-grabbing actions and not on all of the research, strategizing, and organizing that went on behind the scenes. When people think of activism, they may not think of most of what it actually is and may not appreciate why it’s so effective.

Active nonviolence works through disrupting a situation, removing support for a harmful system through acts of noncooperation, and modeling new ways of being. There are hundreds of techniques that activists make use of. Creatively applying a variety of techniques keeps social change campaigns moving forward.

Scope (Visionary? Realistic?)

Should we be strategic and try campaigns we think we can win? Should we be more radical in modeling the bigger changes we dream of?¹⁸ In setting a vision or goal for your activism, there's tension between being idealistic and pragmatic. Yet, as activist Mariam Kaba explains of debates about police reforms versus police abolition: "For some people, reform is the main focus and end goal and for some people, abolition is the horizon. But I don't know anybody who is an abolitionist... who doesn't support some reforms."

How does one know which are the right reforms—ones that could move toward a bigger transformation and won't be co-opted or wind up creating greater harms? To answer this, activists use queries such as:

- Does the initiative increase decentralization and the diffusion of power and control, both economic and political, rather than their concentration?
- Does it legitimize or expand a system we are trying to dismantle?
- Will we have to undo this later?
- Does it influence public opinion and rally active support to our cause?¹⁹

Your goal, theory of change, and the decisions you make about tactics, won't be shared by everyone. It can be helpful to write a list of both supports for the theory and also evidence or arguments that the theory might be inaccurate or incomplete. A solid theory will come from both research and worship.

To assist with discernment and grounding your activism, you can ask your Meeting for a clearness committee. You can also follow the long Quaker tradition of traveling in the ministry by taking actions together rather than going it alone.²⁰ For more on this topic see the 2021 Canadian Quaker Learning Series pamphlet *Advice and Queries: Discerning Peace and Social Concerns*: <https://QuakerService.ca/PeaceAndSocialConcerns>.

Comfort and discomfort

Each of us faces the tension between comfort and discomfort, between keeping things as they are and changing. This is common to all Quaker activists.

Friend Ray Cunnington observed of people, “Most go along with the crowd, believing their willingness to look the other way is a sign of their peaceful nature.”²¹ Resistance to positive social change frequently comes down to habit, denial, fear, or a lack of clarity about what it will look like to give up the status quo. Although Friends believe in continuing revelation, in practice many still shy away from the discomfort of opening up to Spirit-led changes.

By making ourselves totally open to the working of the Spirit, by reaching down beyond our deepest selves to the very ground of our being, who knows what may happen? We are in effect offering a blank cheque of our lives. This may lead us in directions we had never dreamed of, to new challenges and new ways of living adventurously.²²

At the same time, seeking out discomfort is not always a sign that activism is Spirit-led. Many of us feel distressed by injustices and guilty about our relative comforts (however reasonable or unreasonable that guilt is). Friends who feel guilty may keep busy with constant activism or focusing on the negative to help them feel more moral. These approaches may become an escape from personal or spiritual growth.

Constant discomfort and worry about the state of the world can

be detrimental to physical and mental health. And rumination on problems is not what causes people to be effective long-term activists. Happiness is more likely to lead to continued engagement.²³ So while working for social justice, Friends can't assume that feeling more uncomfortable is necessarily useful or is somehow honest and unbiased.

Quaker activism often involves forgiving yourself for your imperfections and inability to do more to heal the world, while also not shying away from taking meaningful action.

Remaining energized

Social change work takes time and involves many challenges and setbacks. How do activists avoid growing cynical or giving up? One of the most famous active nonviolence trainers in the world, Friend George Lakey, explained in his column for *Waging Nonviolence* in 2018:

While touring the [US] the past couple years, I've seen an enormous amount of reactivity among progressives. Many closely follow media that dwell on bad news, trying to respond to a dozen issues at once, competing for political correctness, scattering their energy, and—no surprise—becoming depressed. That's the opposite of what works for making progressive change.²⁴

Lakey advises that once activists feel committed to a cause and understand what the problems are, they stop putting their energy there. Don't go to film screenings that just repeat how monumental the challenges are. Don't read too much of the bad news on social media. Don't focus your attention too heavily on yourself or your failings. Instead, place your passion and energy mostly on where you want to go and on a strategy to get there. Rather than reacting and being opposed, feel a sense of control by going on the offensive. Choose a positive vision of change that's local and realistic enough to be meaningful and get to work on it.

Faith is a powerful source of motivation for many of the most effective nonviolent activists around the world. It means setting

aside one's ego and its fears. As Lakey explains: "fear attaches us to particular outcomes and particular righteousness and modes of superiority... So this question is of being able to keep the passion, root the passion at a deeper level, so that one can detach from the fear and its symptoms..." Doing that requires being open to the Spirit.²⁵

Identity issues

Most Quakers deeply value the testimony of equality—that is, that there is no one chosen people. Each of us, simply because we exist and regardless of what we've done or who we are, equally have that of God within.

Friend Ursula Franklin told a radio interviewer: "Friends' belief that there is that of God in every person is extremely plain but extremely difficult. Once you truly believe that there is that of God in every person, can you starve God? Can you shoot God? Can you let God in a person suffer because you choose to look the other way? It is simple but very difficult. I think that is why there are so few Quakers, and why so many of us feel always inadequate."

The fact of our total equality is thus the basis for extending the golden rule universally and without exception. This does not mean, however, that we all have the exact same experiences, needs, or skills. There's an increasing recognition that society needs programs and social structures that treat people differently (equity) so as to achieve an equality of outcomes for all (e.g. choosing to hire women over men in fields that have been traditionally male dominated so as to achieve an equality of the sexes working in those fields).

The causes of inequalities, which ones require equity programs, and which equity programs actually work without creating unintended setbacks, are more complicated questions. When Quaker activists think through equity and identity issues, we need to retain front-and-centre the recognition of human beings' fundamental equality, which requires that everyone be treated with dignity and respect.

Canadian Friends Service Committee developed an internal guideline for our communications, which recognizes the following:

1. humans are socialized to different ways of thinking and acting based in part on their identity characteristics (not limited just to those most popularly discussed at the moment),
2. these identity characteristics impact on social norms and structures, creating power imbalances and systemic injustices in many cases, and
3. people are also each unique individuals with far more in common than the identities that divide us.

Not enough focus on identity issues or our own social locations can leave CFSC missing important aspects of social problems. Too much focus on identity issues may lead us to miss other key insights and variables, hindering the effectiveness of our work.

Activist and nonviolence trainer Daniel Hunter has come up with a helpful exercise called *Mainstream and Margins*.²⁶ This is great for activist groups because it doesn't rely on jargon or overly complicated theories, so it can be used in groups with a diversity of viewpoints or education levels. It also overcomes the mistake of presenting relatively static identity characteristics like age, gender, or religion as though they automatically explain group dynamics. Note, though, that the exercise is challenging and so is best done with a skilled facilitator.

No matter how homogeneous a group or an organization believes itself to be, a careful look shows that some characteristics are marginalized. A group known for vigorous and noisy debates has some quiet members. An organization which believes itself to be bureaucratically efficient has a couple of members who would love to cut corners. A solemn and highly disciplined group includes a few who, out of sight, love to party.

The mainstream of a group sets the tone, sets the

communication style, and gets to have its own preferences accepted by the margins. Awareness of this dynamic creates choice points for organizers and facilitators who may or may not cooperate with the system. ...

Rather than viewing oppression as static (i.e. this group is always oppressed), organizers and activists can be aware of the complexities of this unique group. E.g. while society oppresses women in the larger society, an activist group might have a mainstream of women who unintentionally marginalize non-women in the group. ...

Thus mainstream/margin invites curiosity and flexibility, asking the question what is going on in this group now. Organizers then make thoughtful choices about when a mainstream needs assistance in recognizing and re-negotiating its relationship with one of its margins.

The mainstream is not about number—but it is about who has their interest recognized. So, for example, even in a group where most of the group has chronic medical conditions, the norm might be: we don't acknowledge our conditions. ...

Instead of making value judgments about how oblivious the mainstream is, accept it as one accepts the law of gravity. Then go ahead and assist the margins to express themselves and assist the mainstream to hear them.

Instead of a checklist of diversity items to look for—e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation—you can look freshly at each group to see how is mainstream behavior playing out.²⁷

The exercise, then, is about what is normal and accepted within a group and what is marginalized. All groups will marginalize behaviours and ideas, and that can be beneficial (e.g. respect is mainstream, screaming at each other is marginalized) so long as it's done with enough communication and space given to know what the margins are and to hear from them. For

conversations about the mainstream and margins to go well, groups need to create conditions of enough safety and trust that people feel able and ready to speak up.

George Lakey adds that white activists (as most Canadian Quaker activists are) should stop assuming that numerical minority groups are “vulnerable”:

What’s not helpful is the abstract assignment of ‘vulnerability’ to a collective identity. The Collins Dictionary defines the word vulnerable as ‘weakness.’ The very act of describing oppressed groups as needing help from me, ‘the stronger one,’ fits all too neatly into classist, racist and other oppressive conditioning.²⁸

Friends—especially Friends who feel like “the stronger one”—are advised to avoid the temptation to think that they know best or need to protect people or groups they see as weaker.

Labelling everyone with a particular sexual orientation, skin colour, or gender (or intersections of these) with even apparently positive generalized statements (e.g. they’re all wonderful people, they feel traumatized, they should be angry, they’re victims, etc.) is a subtle and common way that activists deny people their full agency and humanity. Believing that communities all agree on their experiences or their priorities for social change is usually inaccurate and condescending.

There are statistical truths about systemic problems that need to be taken very seriously. But assuming that statistics apply to any given individual is a mistake.

Identity is thus an important lens in activism, but one can get carried away and decide that a single issue like gender is the cause of every problem where it may be just one factor (and sometimes, as in the example group Daniel mentions above, it can even work in reverse of how you’d expect).

What’s the solution to these challenges? Treating someone as a full person means listening to what they actually feel and experience, even when it makes us uncomfortable to hear or

goes against our expectations.

Here's a useful example. Psychologist Derald Wing Sue and others have popularized the theory of problematic microaggressions. A study in the US asked Black and Latinx people about their views on some of his textbook examples (statements such as "You speak good English" and questions such as "Where are you from?"). In all cases most respondents were not offended, in some a large majority—80% or more—were not.²⁹

This doesn't mean that microaggression theory is incorrect. It just seems that the theory captures a marginal, but not the mainstream, experience among Black and Latinx folks in the US.

If you support microaggression theory, it might be uncomfortable to listen to people you thought the theory was helping who don't find it helpful. This example highlights how challenging it is to try to speak for people, to guess what they feel, or to assume you know the solutions that will work for them.

In your activism, ask yourself the sources of your information. Does it reflect the research interests and preferences of particular journalists or academics like Derald Wing Sue? Have you looked for other sources of information to round out your understanding, giving you a deeper sense of the issues?

Activists need to be cautious when taking up well-meaning theories. Ask what the impacts of this theory are in practice. What is the evidence that it is helpful and to whom (who does it mainstream and who does it marginalize)?

Friends are not strangers to proposing programs that they later realized were poorly conceived and caused far more harm than good.

Quakers were among the first to promote the idea that incarceration was preferable to physical torture or death and believed that punishment and penance for crime could be accomplished via contemplation. Many

early penitentiaries enforced both isolation and silence, setting up the disastrous and inhumane conditions of the modern prison. Many Friends then recognized that their original theories of incarceration were being used as methods of torture, and so set about attempting to reform the prisons they had helped create.³⁰

A related example that we see at CFSC is non-Indigenous activists speaking about Indigenous peoples as a monolith. This frequently shows up as statements presuming that all Indigenous individuals support certain social justice or environmental causes (like preventing the construction of new pipelines). Many times, for economic and other reasons, some Indigenous people likely oppose such causes, while others support them.

This isn't a reason for you not to take a stand, but as you take your stand, be careful how you're thinking and communicating. Again—who are you listening to and making mainstream, and who are you marginalizing or erasing?

Over the years CFSC has seen many examples of caring activists getting involved in complicated situations in unhelpful ways.

In some cases issues faced by Indigenous peoples aren't reported on accurately in the news or on social media. Empathetic settler activists then react and come in thinking they're supporting justice, when in fact their involvement exacerbates messy internal divides within Indigenous communities.

We've even seen activists backing individuals who are spreading outright false information or trying to advance personal agendas. The combination of hard-line positions and poor understanding of delicate situations undermines credibility and can cause serious harms.

CFSC feels that our role as a non-Indigenous organization is not to automatically support those who shout the loudest about their grievances. We strive to first understand a problem sufficiently and look at it from various angles before deciding

on a respectful and measured response that is consistent with our Quaker values and with solidarity.

Again, Friendly activists can avoid making matters worse by engaging in enough prayerful discernment, building respectful relationships, and doing research that includes hearing from a diversity of viewpoints.

Engage or disrupt? The roles of social change and elements of peacebuilding

To what extent is it useful to engage with governments or other power-holders and to what extent is engagement merely enabling the status quo?

There's a difference between having access to powerful people (being able to talk to them for instance) and having *influence* with them (being able to convince them to take action). If we participate in government consultations, does that legitimize their policies? If we don't participate, does that help anything?

Quakers have differing views here. Friend Clarence Pickett said, "Our duty and call is to live in that state of tension which enables us to be at the same time critic and friend of government, to study its workings sufficiently to be able to help religious insight become political action."³¹ That is, Quakers and others can serve as a voice of conscience for politicians (who are certainly hearing from many interest groups not motivated by conscience). Many times this means speaking truth to power, but doing so in ways that are most likely to be heard.

Friends based in New York and Geneva have a long history of offering spaces for quiet diplomacy and relationship-building with influential people within the United Nations. This work often yields important results, although ones that for reasons of confidentiality have not been widely talked about.

Early Quakers were divided in their thinking about what was possible to demand of governments. Some, like Isaac Pennington, felt that because governments (and the people comprising them) aren't spiritually grounded, they don't

comprehend the truth of our deep connectedness to each other. Until this inner peace has been felt and lived as a Truth that reveals to the individuals in government a path to just peace, peace may continue to seem impossible or uninteresting.³²

Friend Bill Moyer developed a theory of four roles of social change, which is helpful for thinking about the tensions of engaging with existing systems versus trying to reform or radically dismantle them.

- **Advocates** work for change by lobbying powerful actors or through lawsuits. The reforms they seek may be radical, but are often more limited. Advocates can sometimes be convinced to be “realistic” by siding mostly with the powerful.
- **Helpers** do what they can within the existing situation. They provide services like food, shelter, or healthcare to those in need. They may be sympathetic bureaucrats or political staffers. Helpers see themselves as the most practical, directly serving peoples’ needs. But this is also the role that might be most looked at as upholding the status quo, helping unjust systems to continue by making them run smoothly.
- **Organizers** are the folks who draw energy and inspiration from bringing people together to get things done. Everyone builds some relationships, but organizers do it naturally and constantly. They tend to see strength in networks and numbers, and can be good at building people up, nurturing new leaders. A danger with organizers is their potential to take over and ignore others’ needs.
- **Rebels** are the ones trying to make the biggest waves, to be the most disruptive to existing ways of doing things. They want major changes and are unhappy with any solution that looks like it’s conceding or compromising too much. When they’re not working well, rebels may get too attached to their contrarian identities and fail to be constructive.

Of course anyone can play more than one role and one might imagine additional roles that Bill didn't include, such as elders who spiritually ground the activism and provide mentorship.

A key point Bill made is that movements are most successful when they incorporate different roles. It's useful for activists to discuss multiple strategies and theories of change, but ultimately, different people working in different ways can work synergistically. So don't waste time debating which is the one right approach to social change. Let other people play the role they're drawn to and find ways to support each other as much as you can. All of your different styles may be necessary to help make both strategic and principled decisions.

If any of these four roles speaks to you (and which one you're drawn to may change), it can be enriching to know that. Playing the role you love can be a source of continued energy and inspiration.³³

When studying activism we find that "again and again throughout history, 'impractical' movements have succeeded in setting the agenda and forcing politicians to act on issues they would have preferred to ignore."³⁴ More visionary or extreme-seeming rebels can fail to win specific changes but still bring new ways of thinking about social problems from the margins into the mainstream. An example is the Occupy movement. It got media and politicians talking about inequality. Many with smaller and more concrete goals were frustrated by Occupy's overly broad vision. But they later benefitted from the shifts won by Occupy. Helpers and advocates were able to use these shifts to win some meaningful reforms to specific social programs.

Social change movements, whatever the context, tap into and support peoples' power. They're at their best when they creatively and responsively employ at least the following four ways to make use of power, as detailed by Friend Gianne Broughton:³⁵

- **Rights-based work** involves appealing to standards that are independent of the conflict, for instance insisting that laws be applied or recognized rights be respected.

- **Interest-based work** involves various forms of dialogue, which demands a great deal of active listening. This work brings parties to the conflict to understand their interests (which are usually different from their stated positions), and eventually to negotiate how these may be served constructively. Successful campaigns are often able to expand their networks and draw in unlikely allies by finding points of convergent interest, as the campaign for the Arms Trade Treaty did. It overcame strong opposition in part through winning the public endorsement of several arms contractors who see themselves as the “responsible” end of the industry.³⁶
- **Power-based work** uses nonviolent force and coercion to oppose and to push for changes. It rests on the idea that authority is given by people, and people can withdraw their cooperation when they feel the need to. Power-based tactics are often symbolic ways to get attention (e.g. throwing fake blood on the office of a corporation with a poor human rights record), which is one reason that this work achieves little without the other three elements. Rebels alone are not nearly as effective as when they work with advocates, helpers, and organizers.

Political scientist Gene Sharp famously developed theories that are primarily about power-based ways of deliberately escalating tensions to (hopefully) hasten positive social change. Which techniques work best in which situations is a subject of on-going study.³⁷

When effective, power-based work is not about one-off actions, but larger strategic campaigns. Stephanie Van Hook, Executive Director of the Metta Center for Nonviolence, explains the general strategy—finding new and surprising tactics in an ongoing creative escalation: “It would be wrong to reach for an extreme method like fasting too early or carry on with introductory level methods like letter writing past the point where it can be effective.”³⁸ The best power-based work gains sympathy (focusing on those who are more undecided or easy to move), rather than alienating, although Sharp notes that

fully converting opponents is the least likely outcome, and is not necessary for a campaign to succeed.³⁹

- **Compassion-based work** may be the most over-looked aspect of creating positive change. All of us want compassion from others—we all want to feel seen and heard. Compassion demands bravery, but is ultimately essential for building positive peace. Resilient and courageous people around the world are continuously expressing compassion, whatever the conflict. While this can be mistaken for being “too soft,” it does not mean giving up on principles. Compassion can produce profound transformations (recall the story about former neo-Nazi Arno Michaelis cited above) through moving hearts and loosening entrenched divisions while working for accountability and change.

History (and mythology) of Quaker activism

At their best, Friends’ social change actions faithfully reflect individual leadings, temperaments, and time periods, as well as more universal Quaker ideals and expressions of divine Love.

Historical and on-going efforts by Friends acting under concern for just peace are highly regarded, but sometimes misrepresented. Consider an example that Friends are particularly famous for—work to abolish slavery.

John Woolman, recognized by historians as “a major figure in the antislavery awakening, published his first antislavery tract in 1754. A few years later, his friend and fellow Quaker Anthony Benezet began recruiting a network of intellectuals and political leaders to the cause.”⁴⁰ These Friends in the US were not alone in their revolutionary and Spirit-led abolitionist activism:

When it comes to campaigning, the playbook was pretty much written two centuries ago, after a dozen people met in a print shop in London's East End, brought together by Thomas Clarkson, a twenty-seven-year-old Quaker. Thus began a campaign to end slavery that lasted fifty years...

The abolitionists invented virtually every modern campaign tactic, including posters, political book tours, consumer boycotts, investigative reporting, and petitions...

The abolitionists combined immense stamina and courage with an inspirational moral vision and a deep understanding of power and systems. Over their fifty-year campaign, they adapted to massive critical junctures, in the shape of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and Caribbean slave revolts; they combined insider-outsider tactics between street petitioners and parliamentary debate; they recruited 'unusual suspects' as allies, such as repentant slaver John Newton who wrote 'Amazing Grace,' to work alongside freed slaves and Christian ministers.⁴¹

This work was indispensable in overcoming denial in the general public and amongst influential individuals, including some politicians and slave owners. These activists helped to shift hearts and understandings, opening people up to the true brutality of slavery. They got many people to see beyond hateful beliefs, such as that slavery was "natural" or "inevitable."

But many Friends also owned slaves. According to historian Thomas Drake, in the 1700s Friends' views on enslavement were likely to fall into one of four categories:

1. A majority accepted slavery "without much qualm or question."
2. Some were "perplexed, but did nothing."
3. Some felt that slaves should be treated "kindly" and

offered a Christian education.

4. And a "sensitive few doubted if Christians should be enslaving their fellow men."

Various other sources make it clear that, on the whole, Friends were racist and unwelcoming to people of colour.⁴² The minority of Quakers who were strong activists, and are today much celebrated, were typically unpopular in their Meetings for causing tension and discomfort.⁴³

Viewed with enough distance, it's easy for us today to see the immorality of the actions of Friends who attempted to shut down the abolitionists in their Meetings. Their desire to hide from the discomfort the abolitionists made them feel by restoring silence was not an expression of Love or Truth.

It is also certain that other Friends who were not led to become activists for abolition supported and upheld the activists around them vocally and in prayer. They helped to create the gathered community that nourished the abolitionists over many long decades of activism.

What was true of slavery has been true in most cases: some Friends take bold action, some Friends support them in various ways, and still others work against them, at times by merely conforming to the injustices of their day.

Most social change actions undertaken by Friends have in fact been highly contentious and not accepted or respected by all. For instance the 1660 letter to King Charles II is often referenced today as a revolutionary commitment to pacifism. Yet at the time it was very controversial because pacifism was considered a "personal belief and witness, not corporate (some felt that this was an action that the other churches they had left would take—impose a belief without having heard and reflected the views of the congregants)."

The declaration is also an important early instance of a point that Quaker activists still grapple with today:

...Quakers were committing themselves personally to pacifism. They had no expectation that the rest of the world would be pacifist; indeed, without a spiritual transformation they likely did not think this was possible.⁴⁴

For early Friends, an inner transformation was the essential focus, as this transformation would move a person from a misguided life to one guided by God.

Further resources

Books

We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice by adrienne maree brown

This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century by Mark Engler and Paul Engler

Fierce Vulnerability: Direct Action that Heals and Transforms by Kazu Haga

Waging Peace: Global Adventures of a Lifelong Activist by David Hartsough with Joyce Hollyday

How We Win: A Guide to Nonviolent Direct Action Campaigning by George Lakey

Are We Done Fighting? Building Understanding in a World of Hate and Division by Matthew Legge

Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements by Bill Moyer

No Extraordinary Power: Prayer, Stillness and Activism (2005 Swarthmore Lecture) by Helen Steven

Online

WagingNonviolence.org—a great source of information and analysis of nonviolent direct action strategies and techniques.

NonviolenceNews.org—inspiring stories of creative nonviolent actions from around the world.

BeautifulTrouble.org—many resources to learn the theory and practice of effective activism.

Visiting Your MP, a Friendly Encounter—a handout from Canadian Friends Service Committee with tips on visiting elected officials
<https://QuakerService.ca/VisitingMPs>

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Notes

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