



Canadian Friends  
Service Committee  
(QUAKERS)  
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## **A Brief History of Canadian Friends' Work in Justice**

Quaker concerns about justice are rooted in the 17th century origins of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in England. The Canadian Friends Service Committee's (CFSC) current justice work arose from a 1972 call from British Friends to support abolishing the death penalty in the United Kingdom.

In response, a campaign was built to end capital punishment in Canada, initiated by Yonge Street Half Yearly Meeting's (Ontario) Prison Committee. The Prison Committee also helped prepare for the Fifth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders, held in 1975 in Toronto.

Through this work, Friends felt spiritually led to learn more about the workings of Canada's justice and corrections systems. They broadened their concerns to include the entire prison system and its impacts on all who engage with it. Through direct service, advocacy, education, and partnership with other Friends, Canadian Friends began to seek alternatives to imprisonment. These alternatives were ones that were more supportive and life-affirming for *all* involved, while still providing opportunities for the prevention and correction of harmful behaviour. The long-term goal became prison abolition. Renamed the Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice (QCJJ), in 1978, the committee and the work were transferred to CFSC.

In 1981, Canadian Yearly Meeting adopted a minute (a public, national statement) on prison abolition. The International Conference on Prison Abolition, now called the International Conference on Penal Abolition, was developed in response with help from QCJJ. This conference continues to convene every two years. Evolving as a program of CFSC, QCJJ worked to encourage prison visiting, provide programs and supplies to prisoners, seek alternatives to prisons, raise awareness of the roots of crime and violence in society and provide small grants to other organizations in support of prisoners and their families.

Informing the public about the failures of the prison system and about proven alternatives became the fresh focus for QCJJ after a visioning process in 1996. As one alternative, QCJJ supported the establishment of the Alternatives to Violence Project in Canada. Beginning in the mid-1990s, QCJJ worked to promote restorative justice as a way of healing for both victims and offenders. Newsletters and workshops on conflict resolution and concepts of justice as healing were the focus of activity at that time. New resources were developed, including peace education resources for schools and community organizations. Addressing the impacts of crime, helping congregations to meet victims' pastoral care needs and providing opportunities for those impacted by crime to speak

publicly about their experiences were added to the focus. Given this changing orientation, the committee was renamed Quakers Fostering Justice (QFJ).

Quakers Fostering Justice has reaffirmed Friends' commitment to Penal Abolition and fostering just and compassionate ways of life as a long-term vision. Within that, it was important to look for underserved issues in Canada; where the need is great and where Friends have some knowledge and experience.

One such area is the impact of the justice system on children and youth. Children of incarcerated parents are particularly affected, and they may suffer life-long impacts from the related trauma they experience thus making them more likely to become involved with the penal system themselves. This area of work builds on Friends' long-term commitment to healing and restorative approaches; it affirms that children are unwitting victims of the punishments meted out to their parents. It also provides the opportunity to bring the expertise of Friends in Europe and Australia to benefit children and youth in Canada, grounding a strong argument for alternatives to incarceration and punishment, particularly for youth, parents and primary caregivers. We engage in this work in order to increase public awareness and involvement, to effect policy change to ensure compliance with the best interests of children and youth, and to reduce the number of children and youth adversely impacted by Canadian justice and corrections systems.

To further those objectives, QFJ currently conducts research, seasons and clarifies concerns through worshipful discussions and networking, and provides relevant information and educational opportunities. We foster education and dialogue among Friends and with the wider community. We provide relevant information on major issues of concern to Friends, decision-makers, interested and engaged constituencies and the general public. We support policy dialogue in a non-partisan manner through the provision of briefing papers, joint statements, letter-writing, and interventions at domestic and international meetings and through partnerships with other organizations, networks and coalitions.