

# What makes Canadian Friends Service Committee's voice different?

CFSC is the national peace and social justice agency of Quakers in Canada and, as such, what we say and do can reflect (in the eyes of some) on all Canadian Quakers. This means that we have a particular duty to be Friendly in our communications. CFSC strives to avoid rhetoric, and maintains high standards on how we communicate.

## Checklist for CFSC Communications

1. Do we need to communicate on this issue? Do we plan to do further work on it?
2. Is this written from a place of love and concern for the wellbeing of all involved?
3. Is this a reflection of the Quaker testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and unity with creation?
4. Will this speak to that of God in the reader?
5. Does this communication treat everyone, regardless of what they've done, with equal dignity and respect?
6. Are interpretations generous toward all, especially those with whom we do not agree?
7. Does this communication compliment and celebrate as well as criticize?
8. If criticisms are made, do they focus solely on actions as distinct from people?
9. Does this highlight nuance and complexity?
10. Does it attempt to represent possible win-win solutions to the problem(s) raised?
11. Is this a well-researched position?
12. Is diversity present?
13. Are identity issues adequately considered while acknowledging unique individuality and not downplaying shared humanity?
14. Is this simple and free from jargon and buzzwords?

Social justice groups are diverse with many different voices. Some are more cautious than CFSC in what they say publicly. However, speaking broadly just for general illustrative purposes, here are some important distinctions to consider:

## Canadian Friends Service Committee...

Is focused around the Quaker testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and unity with creation. Quakers often refer to the testimonies as "putting faith into action." The testimonies provide a valuable guide to help us discern and act in a manner faithful to our Light within. Social power is an important, but not an exclusive, lens for understanding and expressing the testimonies.

Acts from love, sometimes with anger or any mix of other emotions. Our approach can be very firm, but love must continue to be the primary motivation, the "first motion."

Is open to understanding all positions, striving for unity. George Fox described "having a sense of all conditions." CFSC seeks for this deeper holding of apparently contradictory perspectives. This leads us to keep listening and to making more generous and nuanced interpretations of the intentions and actions of those with whom we don't agree. This doesn't mean that we're neutral. Rather, we're open to opposing views having something to add to a discussion.

Tries for cooperation, not confrontation. We see the world as a complex web of relationships and mutual interdependence wherein the best ways forward are usually win-win. We strive to voice even strong objections without becoming adversarial.

We recognize that even if we succeed in harming our opponents, that harm will not stay with them alone. Harming opponents does not create the conditions for healing or for lasting justice. Rather than tear people down, we strive to build people up.

## Some social justice groups...

Are focused on social power and highly value equity (i.e. differential treatments until equality of outcomes is achieved for the marginalized and oppressed).

Act from anger.

Focus on the people and conditions that they care about, making critical interpretations of the intentions and actions of opponents without considering their feelings and needs. This can take the form of labelling people with pejorative terms like "toxic" or focusing on who deserves to feel what and belittling feelings believed to be undeserving.

Collapse the world into binaries of opposition wherein it is imagined that one side can only win when the other loses (e.g. left vs. right, women vs. men, victims vs. oppressors, marginalized vs. privileged, the working class vs. the bourgeoisie, BIPOC vs. white, etc.).

## Canadian Friends Service Committee...

Believes that process matters and the conditions through which change is created will impact on the outcomes. CFSC takes time with discernment and research, making a thoughtful and measured response.

Forcing a change before the conditions have been created to maintain it can lead to unforeseen harms. Quaker process can be slow; however the end product is substantial and supported by all. It is important to test our leadings, including asking opinions of staff and committee members.

At times the outcome may include support for controversial actions like nonviolent coercion (such as aspects of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement), but we carefully consider if such escalation is necessary and if all other approaches have been tried. When we do support nonviolent escalation, we keep the focus on solutions (e.g. that BDS does not exist to punish Israel, but to apply nonviolent pressure until three specific and attainable demands are met).

Sees that of God in all. We seek to treat everyone, regardless of what they have done, with equal dignity and respect. This doesn't mean that we agree with them, or that we stay silent about harms they cause. It means that we attempt to separate people from their actions. We seek to compliment (saying what we learned from someone or what we agree with) before criticizing. When we do criticize, we focus on ideas or actions (e.g. a particular policy) not the people (the politician). We try to treat the other side as friends, not as strangers or enemies. We recognize that it can feel righteous to put people down, but that comes at a cost to us, as we lose some of our compassion and become a little less human ourselves.

CFSC is largely optimistic, continually seeking to reach that of God in people.

## Some social justice groups...

Believe that since the end goal is to dismantle systems of brutality and oppression, nearly any tactic is less violent, and thus, fair game. They feel that they must force the other side to change as quickly as possible.

They do not generally offer a vision of change that could realistically be agreed to by their opponents. They might rapidly move to boycotts and other coercive tactics without having first tested and exhausted less extreme, and potentially more effective, conflict transformation techniques.

Reject care and civility toward opponents as part of the problem, and instead dehumanize them. This can be subtle (e.g. mocking a politician) but is often uncomfortably similar to the othering that social justice groups believe they're working against. The other side is seen as an enemy.

They're largely pessimistic, believing that the only way to get through to people is to force them to change (e.g. by talking over them, shaming them, calling for them to be fired, etc.) and if that fails, to isolate them.

## Canadian Friends Service Committee...

Does not require purity or uniformity. Friends in the 1800s tried to maintain strict purity through frequently reading people out of Meeting for various infractions. Today we know that our positions at CFSC are strengthened by remaining open to new Light.

To be accessible to the widest audience, we avoid jargon and buzzwords in our public communications and keep our tone simple and inviting.

Doesn't have to take everything on. In keeping with our testimony to simplicity, we recognize that we are not called to communicate on every issue. Silence is not always violence, and can be more helpful than adding to the cacophony, especially where we only have a shallow understanding of the situation or don't have something that needs to be said. We aim not to make tokenistic statements on issues we aren't led to further work on.

Recognizes both systemic problems and individual uniqueness. CFSC holds that:

- 1) humans are socialized to different ways of thinking and acting based in part on their identity characteristics (not limited just to those popularly discussed by many social justice groups),
- 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.

## Some social justice groups...

Can be dogmatic and focused on purity, maintaining tight group norms that are heavily policed by members. This leads to a culture of self-censorship and groupthink, while rejecting additional information or contrary evidence.

A specific vocabulary is used that further separates the social justice in-group from opponents.

Are quick to react to news items (perhaps at times largely to earn status within the group or for fear of being called out for not responding). The pace of responses does not allow for careful research, reflection, or strategizing. It may lead to feeling encumbered and spread too thin.

Are skilled at critical analysis of systemic problems through an identity lens. At times this reduces complex thinking about the range of factors at play in what are really complex adaptive problems.

Status hierarchies can arise, elevating those with marginalized identities or lived experience of victimhood. Expertise, individual uniqueness, and common ground among people with different identities may all be downplayed.

## Canadian Friends Service Committee...

Not enough focus on identity issues can leave CFSC missing important aspects of social problems. Too much focus on identity issues may lead us to miss other key issues, hindering our effectiveness.

We believe in learning from people from diverse ethnic, racial, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, etc. backgrounds, as well as people from diverse professional, religious, and ideological backgrounds. It is by bringing in enough diversity that we will come to understand problems and be able to discern the most effective courses of action.

This area is highly fraught and delicate and we will continue to speak our truth with care and with the inputs of people with diverse lived experiences and expertise as much as possible.



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## Some social justice groups...

Actions and perspectives that don't fit strict boundaries are—sometimes entirely validly, sometimes more dubiously—called violent, criticized for making people unsafe, or labelled some combination of ableist, sexist, patriarchal, homophobic, transphobic, white supremacist, etc.

Diversity is more narrowly defined. This definition, and concerns about impurity or guilt by association, can keep group members from engaging with people who don't hold their same ideology.