QUAKERS
Canadian Friends Service Committee

What makes Canadian Friends Service Committee's voice different?

CFSC is the national peace and social justice agency of Quakers in Canada. In the eyes of some, this means that we speak for Canadian Quakers. As such, we have a duty to be Friendly in our communications.

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?

We celebrate the incredible achievements of the many historical and ongoing movements that have made our world more just and equitable. Social justice groups are diverse with many different voices, perspectives, and priorities. Many are closely aligned with CFSC's approaches. Some are more cautious than CFSC in what they say publicly. Some are quite different from CFSC and communicate in ways that we would not endorse.

This document is not offered as a criticism or to advance an argument in a debate. It's an internal guidance for CFSC members and staff. For that reason, the points made are mostly broad and general rather than identifying specific examples. We share this document publicly in case it proves useful to others, not because we think that everyone should agree with us or communicate as we choose to. We continue to learn and to seek fresh ideas about our communications. We are happy to discuss this document or any of our communications, so if you have a question, suggestion, or complaint, please get in touch.

Canadian Friends Service Committee...

Is a Quaker faith-based organization 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.

Speaks 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 seeking to make 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 succeeded in harming our opponents, that harm would not stay with them alone but would extend within their social networks. 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 voices...

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

Speak from anger.

Focus on the people and conditions they care about, making critical interpretations of the intentions and actions of opponents. This can take the form of labelling people with pejorative terms like "toxic" or focusing on who deserves to feel what and belittling feelings said to be undeserving.

Collapse the world into binaries of opposition wherein communications state or imply that one side can only win when the other loses (e.g. left vs. right, women vs. men, victims vs. oppressors, marginalized vs. privileged, secular vs. religious, the working class vs. the bourgeoisie, BIPOC vs. white, one generation vs. another, etc.).

Canadian Friends Service Committee...

Believes that process matters and that the conditions through which change is created will impact 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, partners, and committee members.

At times the outcome may include support for controversial actions like nonviolent coercion (e.g. 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 people. We seek to treat everyone, regardless of what they've 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 doing so 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 voices...

Express that since the end goal is to dismantle systems of brutality and oppression, nearly any tactic is less violent, and thus, fair game. They communicate that they must force the other side to change as quickly as possible. The vision of change offered may not take the opponents' feelings, needs, and perspectives into full enough consideration.

Communications might rapidly move to encouraging 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 advocates say they're working against. Communications about the other side can portray them as an enemy to humilitate and defeat.

Communications are largely pessimistic, arguing 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.) or to isolate them.

Canadian Friends Service Committee...

Does not require purity or uniformity. Friends in the 1800s tried to maintain strict purity through frequently removing people from membership 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.

Strives to recall that, at the level of the Spirit, all people are equal. We recognize both systemic problems and individual uniqueness:

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 or issues that divide us.

Some social justice voices...

Communicate dogmatically, with a focus on purity and policing in-group actions and ideas. When this happens it leads to a culture of self-censorship and groupthink, 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 may 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. While beneficial in many ways, this can also reduce complex thinking about the range of factors at play in what are in fact complex adaptive problems.

Status hierarchies may arise, sometimes amplifying the loudest and most negative voices over those with better informed ideas about how to take effective action. Expertise, individual uniqueness, and common ground among people with different identities can all be marginalized.

Canadian Friends Service Committee...

Not enough focus on identity 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.

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. We aim to strike a healthy balance 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 voices...

Actions and perspectives that don't fit strict boundaries are—sometimes entirely validly, sometimes with less clear or careful reasons—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 narrower sense of what diversity means, and concerns about impurity or guilt by association, often keep group members from listening to people who don't hold their same ideology.

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