

The Northern Friends Peace Board (NFPB), a Quaker peace organisation active in Northern England and Scotland celebrates its centenary in 2013. Articles about the early history of the Board have been based mainly on the surviving records (1).

## Practical Responses

Board members' Quakerism had deep spiritual roots. Their convictions were strong but they had their feet on the ground; they were determined to focus on achievable aims. Immediately before war was declared, Board members were involved in open-air meetings demanding British neutrality. After the initial shock of the outbreak of war, they promptly but calmly decided their priorities

Their first task was to communicate with Friends, but they also saw the need to reach men of enlistment age and their families, so that conscientious objectors could be supported. They opposed conscription (which began in 1916) as strongly as possible. They made ready to combat the hostility to Germans that was bound to develop and sought to maintain goodwill with people from enemy countries by helping prisoners of war and interned non-combatants. They also gave time to consider how links might be restored after the war. They encouraged the opening up of Meeting Houses to all burdened by war. Cautiously, they joined with other organisations and individuals in a broadly-based peace campaign and advocated seeking a just peace at the end of the war.

This approach was in tune with the national Quaker Llandudno Committee with whom NFPB leaders were in close contact. On 27 October 1914 the Board meeting at Sheffield immediately responded to the London meeting of the same day, presumably obtaining the minute from London by telephone or telegraph.

## Moral Response

NFPB published a pamphlet shortly after the outbreak of war in 1914, entitled *'The Society of Friends and the War'* (2). It opposed enlistment and offered Friends an alternative. 'To join in military service is to throw away or mar the splendid opportunity for non-combatant services.' It affirmed 'a splendid vision of what human unity is' and deplored 'the inexpressible evil of violating this fellowship.' They put their faith in 'the power of spiritual forces – and spiritual forces only – to build the structure of humanity and redeem it from error.' For Quakers, 'this vision and faith makes war ... an impossibility.'

Their opposition to the war was grounded in their radical interpretation of Christianity, which, 'if it is anything at all, is of necessity an international religion'.

Their belief was that 'if war is to end it will be by the steadfastness of its uncompromising opponents.' They repudiated the opinion of many professed peace-lovers who held that 'the only practical way of securing peace is to prepare for war'. Such beliefs 'have hideously failed,' the pamphlet said. 'It is vain to believe that more militarism is going to abolish militarism and make this the last war,' an observation which was true then and is still pertinent a century later.

The Question and Answer section argues that 'nothing is inevitable in a world where there is freedom – except the fact that as we sow, we reap.' In an echo of the 1660 Declaration to Charles II we read, 'To those followers of Christ who hold that war is in its essence contrary to the spirit and teaching of their Master, no war can be righteous.'

Anticipating the pressure that the opponents of war would come under, the pamphlet asks: 'If Friends are not 200 years ahead of their time what reason have they for existence? How will an ideal ever become a reality unless someone who believes in it is ready to suffer ridicule, misunderstanding and persecution in its support? The greatest service anyone can render his country is to be true to his ideal.'

'War', it points out, 'is entirely different from police measures [where] the act of punishing the evil doer is taken out of the hands of the individual and handed over to the community. This is precisely what war does not do: the individual nation takes its own action usually in a hot passion, without consulting the interests of mankind as a whole.'

There will be no lack of opportunity for 'true national service': rebuilding what has been destroyed, medical and ambulance work, helping aliens, relief work, learning German and going to Germany to aid reconciliation after the war, keeping business and trade steadily growing but 'perhaps the greatest and most difficult of all, witnessing to our beliefs in the midst of a contemptuous and hostile people.'

## Political and Emotional Response

The NFPB pamphlet of 6 August 1914 *'What shall we do?'* (3) is a passionate outpouring of distress at the anticipated horrors of war and anger at the political system which led to it.

'Our efforts to prevent war have been in vain. The great mass meetings held up to the 11th hour have failed to change the policy of the Government, entangled by secret undertakings and conversations.'

It continues in the same eloquent and uncompromisingly radical vein. *'This is not a people's war. It has its origins in the military bureaucracies of the powers, the suspicions of diplomatists, the cynical self aggrandisement of the war lords. Russian peasants and German artisans are pawns in the deadly games of their governments. The Great War is a great crime – a crime against God and humanity – a crime against our slowly won civilisation.*

*'It is for us to preserve the better spirit to show men that whatever the quarrels of the rulers, the peoples of the kindred nations across the North Sea are brothers ... We may unjustly be called pro-German but now is the time to stand to our principles'. We must show 'a burning, living faith', taking 'no part or lot in the war system because it is a denial of the Christian faith.'*

*Therefore 'we must plead for a peace founded upon the basis of absolute justice, a settlement in which the rights of man are regarded and by which all nationalities will be able to submit future disputes to a strong international court. Never again shall the people of England be plunged into war by our secret understandings.*

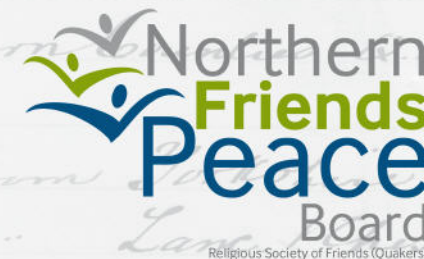
*'1900 years ago, the Prince of Peace suffered on the cross, forsaken by those who had followed Him in days of popularity. But a few were ready and willing to ... proclaim themselves followers of the beaten man. Can we do less now?'*

## Conclusion

The Northern Friends Peace Board expressed its deepest feelings and commitments in *'What shall we do?'* following it soon after by another well-argued pamphlet with further guidance for Friends. NFPB defied wartime regulations by refusing to submit their publications to the Censor. Principled, practical action was decided promptly, calmly and realistically. By the end of the war Friends nationally recognised the important role NFPB had played in communicating a Quaker peace message.

## References

1. Annual reports, Minutes of Board meetings and Secretary's reports. West Yorkshire Record Office, Leeds.
2. NFPB *'The Society of Friends and the War,'* Pamphlet, 1914. NFPB office, Bolton
3. NFPB *'What shall we do?'* Pamphlet, Leeds, 6 August 1914. NFPB office, Bolton



# Responses to the Outbreak of War, Autumn 1914

Barry Mills

## Centenary Essays

Historic pieces drawn from the NFPB archives

*them their fellow Christians and citizens generally in the active promotion of peace in all its height and breadth. That, as the review of the Committee opens out before it, <sup>should</sup> any Friend with concern offer to assist in this glorious cause, the Board be empowered to make such arrangements as see*