
THE
FRIENDS'
SCHOOL



Quakers

QUAKERS

An explanation

This booklet is addressed particularly to the parents of students attending The Friends' School Hobart. It is written with the aim of being helpful for them to know something about the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in which the school is vested. It is not intended in any way to proselytise, for people cannot be 'converted' to being Quakers, they have to find out for themselves whether they are Quakers or not.

The School's purpose and concern is to expose the children who attend it to a structure of values that it is hoped will have impact on their lives. It should be stated at the outset that these values are not exclusive to the Society of Friends as they find expression in many faiths. Nevertheless, the basic beliefs which underlie Quakerism are separate from mainstream churches because of a different perception of the source of ultimate spiritual authority.

To Friends, doctrine and Scriptures are of secondary importance to the direct revelation of the will of God speaking to each individual. It follows then, that the philosophy of a school under the auspices of the Society of Friends, will have distinctive qualities.

History

It might be helpful to trace how this perception of religion came about. The Quaker movement arose in England around 1650, at a time when there was much religious and political ferment. Quakerism grew out of a fusion of the aspirations of many seeking and exploring groups. It was led by George Fox who, at Pendle Hill in the Lake district, publicly expounded his revelation that all human beings had the capacity to know God directly, with no need for intermediaries or third parties. Hence, consecrated church buildings, priests, creeds, sacraments, set prayers or ritual were not seen as requisite to worship.

Many like-minded followed George Fox. At that time, when the British population was about five million, membership of the Society grew rapidly to some 50,000. Many were persecuted for their radical belief. Gradually, the movement became more accepted and it spread to the colonies. Quakers began to be recognised for their honesty in business; succeeding as retailers, as founders of great banks, developers of iron smelting, makers of chocolate. From the first, Friends have been concerned with education.

While there is but this one Quaker school in Australia, there are seven in England and Ireland, and numerous educational establishments in the United States. During the 19th Century, membership of the Society declined in numbers. There are now about 18,000 Quakers in Britain, 120,000 in the United States, 40,000 in East Africa (largely due to American influence), and some 1,500 in Australia and New Zealand. Presently that makes the worldwide total of around 200,000 Quaker members, a very small religious group.

From the revelation of George Fox, has come almost everything that is Quakerism today - its workings, structures and testimonies. It is often asked if it is regarded as Christian and the answer must depend on the meaning given to 'Christian'. If it means commitment to a range of doctrines that are central to much Christian thought - Virgin Birth, Original Sin, Atonement - then there are Friends who would say they are not Christian. However, if it means adherence to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, then most, if not all, Friends would affirm their Christianity.

Worship

The corporate life of the Society centres on meeting for worship, based on silence. The best way to understand these meetings is to attend one of those held at the Meeting House in Argyle Street every Sunday, or on Wednesday mornings in term time. All comers are welcome. The meeting takes place in silence, sometimes nothing at all is said, sometimes someone present speaks, sharing an insight. Ideally, Friends come to meeting for worship 'with heart and mind prepared', laying aside the preoccupations of life, and entering with reverence and a will to 'centre down' into communion with the spirit of God.

That is how Friends in Britain, Australia and parts of America, worship today. Many groups in the United States do have more structured services, paid clergy and hymn singing. Nonetheless, some common ground still persists in the worship.

Organisation

The practical organisation of Quakerism in Australia comprises Regional Meetings in every State, each with its own Clerk who gauges the sense of meetings held regularly for the purpose of necessary business, since there are no bishops or priests. Business meetings, too, are conducted in a spirit of worship, beginning and ending in silence. Such practice is replicated in staff committee and Board of Governors' work within the School, too. No votes

are taken, for decisions are made when the particular group feels it can go forward in unity. Only at that point is a minute approved for action.

Annually there is a Yearly Meeting of Australian Quaker members (and some other interested attenders) held in one or other of the bigger centres - Melbourne in 2001, Hobart in 2002, Adelaide 2003. There is a paid one-person secretariat for the Society of Friends based in Melbourne. An experienced Friend is appointed to serve as Clerk of The Yearly Meeting for a three-year term of service, without pay. Attendance at Australia Yearly Meeting averages 300 members - men, women and children.

Witness

In personal conduct, Quakers aim at the ideal of simplicity and moderation in lifestyle and language. They do not swear oaths, as Quakers recognise only a single standard of truth. Some Quakers are teetotallers. Quakers set store by integrity and probity in business. They avoid betting and gambling.

Equality is a central testimony of Friends, who recognise no barriers of gender, age, race or official status, not honouring one person over another (hence plain names, not titles, are used among Friends). This is not taken to mean, though all should be heard, that all opinions can have equal weight in determining decision. There are obvious differences of ability and insight.

The testimony to peace is central to Quakers and is entirely inconsistent with war and preparation for it. Peacemaking itself is regarded at three levels; personal serenity; harmonious family and community relationships (including non-violent resolution of conflict); and, public order and security.

A testimony to community reflects Friends' sense of connectedness with one another and all creation. It is thought right that each individual is free to develop their potential so long as it is not to the detriment of others.

The Friends' School Hobart

While the positions of Principal and Presiding Member (Chairman) of the Board are, and always have been since foundation in 1887, filled by Quakers, the percentage of staff, parents and children in the school who are members of the Society, is very small. However, the principles of Quakerism are still firmly espoused by the School. Its students are exposed at appropriate levels of their development to these values, not only in Gatherings where silent waiting is practised, but in the hope they may learn in all their educational activity to search for themselves and judge what is good and what should be rejected, or made good.

Permeated with this history, these traditions and testimonies, The Friends' School is committed to diversity and an absence of dogmatism. A keen interest in service projects and a lively concern for social justice are characteristics. Quakers are always open to new truth and more nearly perfect understanding. With the passage of three hundred and fifty years, personal and group experience, new research findings come changes and fresh insights to members of The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

The history of the School has been documented in *The Rose and the Waratah* by William Oats and *In the Spirit of Family* by Sheila Given. Both books are obtainable for purchase from the Development Office at the School. For those interested to know more about Quakerism, there are relevant books in the School library. There is also a well-stocked library of appropriate Quaker literature located in The Friends Meeting House, Argyle Street and a selection of books about Quakers in the School Archives.

Purpose and Concerns

The Friends' School is a co-educational Quaker School based on fundamental values such as the intrinsic worth of each person, the recognition of "that of God" in everyone, the desirability of simplicity, and the need to establish peace and justice.

As a learning community, we are concerned for the academic, cultural, physical, social and spiritual development of each person in our care.

We seek to help our students develop into men and women who will think clearly, act with integrity, make decisions for themselves, be sensitive to the needs of others, be strong in service and hold a global perspective.

We believe that these aims can best be achieved with the active support of all members of our School community.

July 1998