

QUAKERISM IN A NUTSHELL

Who are the Quakers?

Quakers are members of the [Religious Society of Friends](#), a community that dates back to England in 1652 when a young itinerant preacher named George Fox converted a group known as the Westmoreland Seekers. Over the next several years, the new movement grew and attracted the attention of authorities. Over the next 30 years, the British Government persecuted and imprisoned Quakers in large numbers, with hundreds dying in harsh prison conditions. Their public witness was crucial in the eventual passage of the Toleration Act of 1689 which guaranteed religious minorities the right to worship in public.

Are we Quakers or Friends?

From the earliest years of Quakerism in England, we have referred to ourselves as Friends of Truth, or more commonly, just Friends. The word “Quaker” was originally a derogatory nickname. According to George Fox, the name first applied to the group when he advised a magistrate to “tremble at the word of the Lord.” Also, early Friends were often said to tremble or quake in the fervor of their religious worship. Nevertheless, the name stuck, and nowadays, we use Quakers and Friends interchangeably.

What do Quakers believe?

As Quakers, we reject formal creeds and doctrines. We expect our community to be held together not by conformity of thought but by love. We center our religious life on seeking to discern and follow the divine Light and believe, according to George Fox, that there is “that of God in everyone.” In other words, all humans without exception have deep within themselves a capacity for a direct experience of the Divine, that this experience is transforming, and that we can appeal to this capacity in others as the basis of our unity. [More on Quaker beliefs.](#)

How do Friends worship?

In traditional Quaker worship, we have no priests or ministers, rituals, or programmed activities such as readings or music. We hold our [Meeting for Worship](#) in silence, so that each worshiper may, in unity with all those assembled, open his or her mind and heart to the leading of the Divine Spirit. During the silence, which usually lasts for about an hour, anyone may rise and speak.

Although we sometimes describe our Worship as silent, it’s probably better described as expectant waiting, in the faith that God is already present in our lives, if we would just take opportunity to listen. When we assemble for worship, we typically pause for a period of silence, as we each “center down” in our own way, seeking to still our minds and open our hearts. At some point, it’s common for one or more Friends to be moved by the Spirit to offer spoken ministry out of their own experience—a brief and spiritual reflection, story, encouragement, song, or prayer. We accept each message into the silence, and it contributes to the uniqueness of that particular Meeting for Worship. The Meeting ends when a designated person shakes hands with the person next to them, at which point we all likewise greet our neighbors.

What is unprogrammed worship?

[The Quaker way](#) of worship is distinctive, and what most often strikes first-time attenders is what is absent—we have no priest or minister, no liturgy, or program of worship, and no outward sacraments. Since our beginnings, Friends have sought to strip away all that’s non-essential, all that might potentially place a barrier between us and God. We have no priest or minister, because we believe that all may minister. We observe no outward sacraments, because we believe that all life is sacramental, and that being together in God’s presence is our

communion and our baptism. We have no liturgy or predetermined order of worship, because we believe that the essence of worship is to be open to the promptings of the Spirit.

Are Quakers Christians?

Today, the majority of us see themselves as Christians, firmly rooted in the Bible and the wider Christian tradition. However, there are many Friends who describe themselves as other than Christian, out of a conviction that the essence of Quakerism is something universal, transcending the specifics of any one religion.

Do Friends believe in the Bible?

We see the Bible as a precious record that has been left to us by writers who were inspired by their encounters with God. We assert, however, that the same encounter and inspiration are available to us today. Quakers have always maintained that only those who are themselves inspired by the same Spirit that inspired the scriptures can understand the meaning of the Bible. So it's the experience of the Light in our hearts, and not the Bible, that's our primary source of truth.

What are the Quaker "testimonies"?

We strive for an integrity and congruence between what we believe and how we live. This attitude has led over the years to our [Quaker testimonies](#), which are actions or lifestyles that "testify" or witness to the Truth of God's transforming presence in our lives. These include [simplicity of life](#), equality of both sexes and of all persons, personal integrity, active concern for the liberation of the oppressed, love of enemies, cultivation of non-violence, open worship, and free ministry.

Our [Peace Testimony](#) is the most widely known. For over 300 years it has been our consistent affirmation that our understanding of God isn't compatible with violence and war. We base this testimony on what we can say from our own spiritual experience. Over the years, the peace testimony has been lived out in different ways by different Friends, from conscientious objection to military service to relief work to alleviate the suffering caused by war to refusal to pay war taxes to advocacy of disarmament and to work to promote the social conditions that lead to peace.

While there's no official list of Quaker testimonies, their exact manifestation changes with each generation. For example, stewardship of our natural environment has emerged as a contemporary expression of our traditional testimonies of peace, harmony, and simplicity.

How do Friends conduct the business of the Meeting?

We conduct the business of the Meeting in a spirit of worship, waiting upon the Light for guidance, whether this be during the Monthly [Meeting for Business](#) or in separate committee meetings. All persons have an equal say in the process, because the Light is accessible to all.