Right Relationship to Wealth

[[NOTES: Draft ready for YM review 4/1/2007
[[Sources & changes from 1993 F&P: quotations from pp. 19, 26, 32. Everything else is new to NPYM, some borrowed from New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Southeast YMs]]

(See also Care for the Environment, Equality, Harmony, Living in the World, Simplicity, Social Justice, Stewardship)

To be a Friend is to live at odds with a culture shaped by the pursuit of power, status, and wealth. Early Quakers lived in a society dominated by hereditary rank and privilege; modern Quakers live in societies equally dominated by economic class. Wealth or lack of it has an effect on nearly every outward aspect of our lives: housing, clothing, transportation, education, health, recreation, etc. We are clear on the spiritual dangers of a culture obsessed with economic status. We are often less clear about our own deepest attitudes toward money and resources in our lives. Comfortably middle-class Quakers are often reluctant to acknowledge their own place and participation in an economic system based on skewed and ungodly values, including such subtle and passive participation as investing, holding stock and otherwise, in enterprises that promote those values. Also, too much time and attention spent on the accumulation and/or preservation of wealth can preempt more Spirit-led choices in our lives. This is a personal danger, distinct from the societal ills named elsewhere.

We see the fruits of the sin of avarice everywhere. Friends are mindful that the gap between the rich and poor is a seedbed of war. Right relationship to wealth is integral to Friends’ testimonies on equality, social justice, and peace. Friends are responsible for the manner of acquiring, using, and disposing of their possessions, not as ends in themselves but as God’s gifts entrusted to us. We are to use them with humility and care and to share them with others.

Through the gift of spiritual transformation, our relationship to money and possessions changes. Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit, as is mindfulness of the labor, time, energy, and resources needed to make, transport, supply, and purchase every item we see around us. A centered life leads us away from conspicuous consumption and from judging others as successes or failures according to the cars driven, the clothing worn, the level of schooling completed. We strive to look beyond such outward markers to the true value of each individual.

From their beginnings, Friends have opposed gambling and games of chance which promise something for nothing, entice us away from faith in God to faith in luck, and take advantage of our vulnerabilities. Friends continue to work for fair and equitable wages and honest employment practices and to work against exploitation such as unscrupulous credit offers and loans at usurious interest (e.g., at payday loan shops.

Quotations

Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

Deuteronomy 15:10-11

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and
where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

... No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

... And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

Matthew 6:19-21, 24, 28-29

...We brought nothing into the world, so we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

1 Timothy 6:7-10

Every degree of luxury of what kind soever, and every demand for money inconsistent with divine order, hath some connection with unnecessary labor.... To labor too hard or cause others to do so, that we may live conformable to customs which Christ our Redeemer contradicted by his example in the days of his flesh, and which are contrary to divine order, is to manure a soil for propagating an evil seed in the earth.

...

May we look upon our treasures, the furniture of our houses, and our garments, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishement in these our possessions.

John Woolman, 1763

For some there is a danger that care for the future may lead to undue anxiety and become a habit of saving for its own sake, resulting in the withholding of what should be expended for the needs of the family or devoted to the service of the Society. The temptation to trust in riches comes in many forms, and can only be withstood through faith in our Father and his providing care.

London Yearly Meeting, 1945

God calls us to the right sharing of world resources, from the burdens of poverty and materialism into the abundance of God’s love.

Mission statement of Right Sharing of World Resources

Advices

Friends need to examine their decisions about obtaining, holding, and using money and other assets, to see whether they find in them the seeds, not only of war, but also of self-indulgence, injustice, and environmental disaster.

Friends should strive for a sound relationship to money and other resources, making decisions that reflect our testimonies of simplicity, equality, peace, social order, and care for creation—avoiding waste and destruction on the one hand and miserliness on the other.

Self-indulgent habits and ostentatious living dull our awareness and make us insensitive to the needs of others and the leading of the Spirit. When our choices about how we live are rooted in God, we are led away from over-indulgence into simplicity and humility of spirit, and we are
able to keep our material surroundings in proportion to our human needs.

Friends are advised to pay a fair wage to their employees, offering comparable pay for comparable work across racial, ethnic, and gender lines.

Friends are advised against participating in lotteries, gambling, and betting, including such schemes of chance that appeal as benevolences or as ways to finance government programs. Friends should refrain from hazardous speculation and are cautioned against engaging or investing in business that may be ethically questionable.

Queries

Are we mindful, careful, and Spirit-led in our relationship to wealth and resources?

Is our use of wealth consistent with Friends’ testimonies of integrity, equality, social order, peace, right sharing of resources, and care for the earth?

If we have resources, do we share them generously, with humility and care for others? Do we give with grace? Do we give wisely?

If we do not have resources, do we accept with grace what others share? In times of our lives when we choose poverty, are we able to do so without envy or obsession?

Do we take care not to judge others, or ourselves, by the world’s criteria of wealth and status? How do we answer that of God in those who have less than we do? In those who have more than we do?

Do we keep to moderation and simplicity in our daily lives? How do our choices around money, time, and energy reflect the working of the Spirit in our lives and in the world?

Are we clear, as a meeting community and as individuals, that we are stewards and not owners of the property and resources in our care?