NPYM Committee on the Discipline
Questions for Local Friends Groups
on THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE STATE

This “Questions for Local Friends Groups” document shows what is currently in the NPYM book of Faith & Practice about witness. Page references are to the 1993 edition. For questions to stimulate discussion about this material, see the last section.

This document combines introductory paragraphs and quotations from “The Individual and the State” on pp. 36-37 with advices and queries on “Civic Responsibility” from p. 47. The section title is a place-holder suggestion on the basis that ‘the individual and the state’ is somewhat broader than ‘civic responsibility.’

The attitude of Friends toward the state is conditioned by the fact that the state presents two different aspects. When it acts as a coercive agency resorting to violence, it does not conform to Quaker principles. On the other hand, as a necessary instrument for maintaining an orderly society with justice under law for all and for meeting human needs, the state commands respect and cooperation.

Friends are not opposed to all forms of coercion. Proper police activities, incidental to carrying out the rightful purposes of the state and directed solely against persons who refuse to abide by the law, seem necessary and helpful. From its earliest days, however, the Society has held that war is contrary to the will of God, and it has counseled its members to refuse to bear arms or to accept membership in military forces.

As the state becomes more and more responsible for advancing human welfare, members of the Society are increasingly called upon for a variety of civic duties, especially in those areas that have long been among their chief concerns. Through the ballot, by public witness, and in many other ways, Friends may contribute to an enlightened and vigorous public opinion, thus helping to direct public policy toward the fulfillment of Quaker principles. Men and women of intelligence, high principle, and courage are needed to combat the ignorance, self-interest, and cowardice that impede the wise solution of national and international problems.

Integrity and diligence are of the utmost importance in the holding of public office. Qualified Friends should not allow matters of preference or convenience to deter them from this service. The seeming necessity for action by public authorities, however, may sometimes present difficult problems to the officeholder who seeks to be single-minded in loyalty to God. While a prayerful search for divine guidance may lead to a suitable adjustment, it may become necessary, as Friends have sometimes found in the past, to sacrifice position to conscience and expediency to principle.

For those not holding public office, there is a wide field for voluntary public service in agencies and organizations that work for civic betterment.

From their earliest days Friends have counseled obedience to the state except when the law or ruling involved appears to be contrary to divine law. Therefore, when they have engaged in civil disobedience they have done so as a matter of conscience.

Obedience to the state is subject to the religious principle that primary allegiance is to God. The state has no claim to moral infallibility. If its command appears to be contrary to divine law, Friends can only take prayerful counsel to arrive at a Quaker decision. This usually involves testing one’s proposed action by the judgment of the Meeting. When the decision is to refuse obedience to a law or order of the state, in accordance with the dictates of conscience, it is usual for Friends to act openly and to make clear the grounds of their action.

If the decision involves incurring legal penalties, Friends generally have suffered willingly and fearlessly for the sake of their convictions. Friends not personally involved strengthen the Meeting community by supporting their fellow members with spiritual encouragement and, when necessary, with material aid.
Quotations
From pp. 31-32

The Cross of Christ ... truly overcomes the world, and leads a life of purity in the face of its allurements; they that bear it are not thus chained up, for fear they should bite; nor locked up, lest they should be stole away; no, they receive power from Christ their Captain, to resist the evil, and do that which is good in the sight of God; to despise the world, and love its reproach above its praise; and not only not to offend others, but love those that offend them. . . True godliness doesn't turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it; not hide their candle under a bushel, but set it upon a table in a candlestick.

William Penn, 1682

From p. 36

We affirm our unchanging conviction that our first allegiance is to God, and if this conflicts with any compulsion of the State, we serve our countries best by remaining true to our higher loyalty.

Pacific Yearly Meeting, 1953

Advices
From p. 47, advices and queries on “Civic Responsibility”

We value the part we have in shaping the laws of our country. It is our task to see that these laws serve God’s purposes. Our aim is the building of a social order which works toward the kingdom of God. We affirm our unchanging conviction that our first allegiance is to God, and if this conflicts with any compulsion of the state, we serve our country best by remaining true to our higher loyalty.

If, by divine leading, our attention is focused on a law contrary to divine law, we must proceed with care. Before making a decision, we pray for further divine guidance; we consult with others who might be affected by our decision. When clearness on the decision has been reached, we act with conviction. If our decision involves disobedience to the law, we make the grounds of our action clear to all concerned. If there are penalties, we must suffer them without evasion. We care for those who suffer for conscience’s sake.

Since 1992, South Mountain Friends Meeting has used the following text, substituted for the first paragraph above. Willamette Quarterly Meeting has united with them in recommending it for the Yearly Meeting’s next Faith & Practice:

We value the part we have in shaping the laws of our country. It is our task to see that these laws speak to and answer that of God, which we believe is in every person. Our aim is the building of a social order which works toward the expression of God’s love. We affirm our unchanging conviction that our first allegiance is to God, and if this conflicts with any compulsion of the state, we serve our country best by remaining true to our higher loyalty.

Queries
From p. 47

Are we conscientious in fulfilling obligations to the state and society while opposing those contrary to our understanding of the leadings of God?

What are we doing as individuals and as a Meeting to carry our share of responsibility for the government of our community, state, and nation, and for the development of needed international organizations? How are we working for changes in government when change is needed?
To what extent are we interested in the schools of our community and concerned to establish practices in them consistent with the values we cherish as Friends?
Do we share our convictions in a spirit of loving concern?

Some questions for discussion around The Individual and the State in NPYM’s *Faith & Practice*

From NPYM Friends and the Committee on the Discipline

- In your life, **what services do you render to the state? What obedience do you reserve to God?**
- Refusing to take the judicial oath is one way Friends live out the testimonies. Most Friends refuse military service. What are other aspects of Friends’ relationship with governments? With other public agencies and organizations, whether local, national, or international?
- **How does civic responsibility relate** to other Quaker testimonies (integrity, simplicity, equality, community, peace/harmony)?
- **How do the testimonies of Friends manifest themselves in your daily life** as a citizen?
- Have you been called to acts of **civil disobedience**? If so, what is/was that experience like for you, as a Friend and as a member of a wider (non-Quaker) community?
- **What’s missing** from this current material that you find central to living in right relationship with the state?
- Are there **parts of this section that you think would belong better in some other part of the Faith & Practice?** Parts that you think could be **deleted**?
- Can you suggest a better title for this material in *Faith & Practice*?
- **What books, pamphlets, articles, or other resources** can you recommend about Quaker thinking and practice on right relationship with governments?