

**Notes:**

## **Friends and the Military**

**Western Friend Connect – Workshop Meeting Room – 8/9/2018**

**Notes by Charlene Weir**

**Summary of themes:**

1. Peace activists and members of the military are more the similar than different; they share a common passion to make the world a better place. (It's the people who "sit on the couch" who are different.)
2. Friends often unconsciously exclude the veterans and active military who are among us. Friends speak of veterans and active military as "other" and use language that expresses the assumption that veterans and active military are not present, even though they may be. Quaker meetings are dominated and primarily populated by people from a narrow socioeconomic range – economically comfortable, educationally privileged, and white – while people who serve in the military tend to be come from other backgrounds. Friends need to allow veterans and active military members to be seen among them.
3. Quakers suffer from a sense of superiority and righteousness that closes doors, causes veterans to hide in our meetings, and maybe prevents us from hearing what God is calling us to do.
4. Understanding the military and veterans requires *being with* the military and veterans; we need to create a shared grief and a shared commitment.

**Participants:**

- Kindra Bradley – Quaker House (Fayetteville, NC)
- Phyllis Davies – Central Coast Meeting (San Luis Obispo, CA)
- Mary Klein – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Eric Moon – Berkeley Friends Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Pablo Stanfield -University Meeting (Seattle, WA)
- Jim Summers – La Jolla Meeting, (La Jolla)

**Introductions:**

Kindra – Executive Director of Quaker House in Fayetteville, NC, near Fort Bragg; she grew up in a military family; Friends house was founded as a manifestation of the Friend's Peace Testimony; it counsels members of the military and attempts to heal wounds of war.

Eric – Was in the military during Vietnam, became disillusioned with U.S. policies of war-making and with its horrific treatment of veterans; joined Friends.

Pablo Stanfield – Was a conscientious objector (CO) during the Vietnam War. Has provided much CO counseling since then to military members in the Tacoma area, which has the second largest Army base on the West Coast.

Phyllis – Supports efforts in her community to promote nonviolent resolution of conflict and to support the needs of veterans, who are often homeless or in prison.

Jim Summers – Served in the hospital core of the U.S. Navy; has been active for years with Veterans for Peace in San Diego, which has the largest concentration of active military in the world.

**Queries:**

- ONE: How does your Quaker meeting relate to active members of the military and to veterans, both within your meeting and in the wider community?
- TWO: What work is your meeting doing to end the "seeds of war"?

**Conversation notes:**

- **Quakers might have an obligation** to reach out to victims of war even when those victims are also the "victimizers." Pacifism might imply a call to reach out to those who participated in war. Some people who yearn for peace thought it was necessary to put on a uniform.
- **A commitment to non-violence is not absolute.** There is a balance between cowardice and courage and the requirement to avoid violence.
- **Things have changed.** Historically, Quaker peace activism concentrated on draft counseling; we were active in high schools and the community. We actively promoted the option CO status and tried to help young people discern their own leanings. However, draft counseling has diminished due to the all-voluntary army, and there has not been a call for CO counseling for many years. U.S. wars are now hidden wars.
- I do a ministry in peace and anti-violence in other countries now. We have had some success there. For example, Cuba has recently passed a new CO law.

- **We owe something to our country.** I have not felt good about my military service, but I felt good about doing my patriotic duty. I have always felt good about national service. The problems with our current approach to national service is that it treats some people as expendable; only a few have to serve; and the rest of us just support them and fly the flag.
- I feel like our meeting would support any Veterans who came to worship with us. We spend a great deal of time with the homeless population, and many of those individuals are former military.
- **Making our meetings welcoming** would also require us to normalize how we talk about active duty military and veterans in our meetings. I felt very inhibited to divulge the military background of my family to my Quaker meeting early on. It was only when I learned from a presentation in the meeting that the history of Quakers and the military has never been clear-cut, then I felt comfortable sharing my background. Also, over time slowly, I heard the personal stories of Quakers in my Meeting, I learned that that the Peace Testimony was not simple. One Friend who I admire deeply told the story of her Quaker family – that when she was growing up, she demonstrated against the Vietnam War and her brother served fighting in that war. Their parents supported both of them completely.
- **We need to talk openly in Quaker circles about our own personal connections with the military.** We need to claim our own stories. This will let people with similar stories know that they are welcome.
- **People thought of me differently** when they found out I was a veteran. My monthly meeting was supportive, but not my yearly meeting. Other veterans have stopped coming to yearly meeting because of the way they were treated.
- We don't talk enough about "the seeds of war" in our Peace work, how we are all implicated in supporting of the military. We don't talk enough about ways we could welcome people with military connections among us.
- **Our attitude toward the military is shaped by a negative attitude towards lower socio-demographic individuals.** Many people currently serving in the military perceive themselves as COs, even though they haven't found the means to achieve that status formally. While the U.S. may no longer have "the draft" officially, we now have a socio-demographic draft. If we don't reach out to people in the military, this expresses some degree of racism and economic bias. We tend to express the attitude, "You are not well off enough to be in Friend's Meeting." Many people simply do not show up at our meetings – through self-selection – they see our meetings as places that are "not for them." My son is a chaplain in the Army, and I've gone with him to talk with enlisted soldiers; whenever I do this, my own class bias becomes evident to me. This class bias is often characteristic of Friend's Meetings.
- **Our self-righteousness gets in God's way.** In too much of our peace work, we express too much self-righteousness.
- **We practice accidental exclusion and "othering."** The least racist organization I have ever been part of was the US Navy. The Society of Friends is considerably more

racist; we use unconscious exclusionary language. I have taken on as a personal calling to challenge that. My local meeting has been very supportive of me in that and in my work with Veterans for Peace.

- **We sit between.** San Diego Veterans for Peace and La Jolla Monthly Meeting have grown up together in many ways. We often find ourselves **sitting “between”** the “super patriots” and the “peacenicks,” and speaking to each. To the peacenicks, we say, “You call that peace? Look at what is coming out of your mouth!” These “super patriots” might be future members of the Society of Friends. We need to avoid “othering” them; we need to avoid making stereotyped remarks to people who have been to hell and back.
- **We need these people.** People who have joined the military are people who feel like the world needs to be a better a place, and it is their job to make it so. Peace activists are more like them, have more mutual needs, and are more like-minded as activists than they are with people who sit on the couch. There is nobody you would rather be in a lifeboat with than a veteran. They have already made the commitment to make the world a better place. Their choice was honorable.
- **Stereotyping of veterans and members of the military can be cruel.** It is cruel to target individuals as the causes of problems that arise from larger forces; it is cruel to call them “baby-killers”, or to participate in similar violent name-calling and negative interactions.
- **Our meetings are often unaware of our biases and the ways that we are not welcoming.** Historically, Friends meetings included many COs. We listened to them and welcomed them – but we did not welcome the veterans. When a member came to meeting in uniform, they were treated coldly, and they never came back. They might not have been directly criticized, but “the Quaker testimony for conflict avoidance” would trump all other impulses, and these Friends would be frozen out.
- **Maybe our “peace” is too small.** Similar to the core idea of the book, *Your God is Too Small*, maybe our “peace” is too small. Those of us who work for peace sometimes over-speak ourselves. We only tolerate working for peace the Quaker Way. If you are not doing it *our* way, we won’t even stand on the same side of the street with you. We lose our connection to God this way.
- The **Alternatives to Violence** program is a good approach, with many veterans involved. Also, **Paul Chappell’s** work, his project “Peace is Possible” is powerful. (See a 14-minute video of Chappell at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISPRRe27Y0sw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISPRRe27Y0sw))
- **A big step in the right direction would be just to be seen.** Because veterans are invisible in our meetings, many don’t know each other, and they are afraid to speak up. As one Quaker veteran said to me, “When my experience and my identity are recognized, that is power.” We need to talk as if there are veterans in the audience; there are.
- **Walk the talk.** We can talk about this until the cows go home, but if we do nothing and go back to our white, comfortable, homes – nothing will change.

- 
- **Create a shared space.** Veterans for Peace is a ready-made place for Quakers and veteran to do shared work. We accompany people in their grief. When we began doing that, it was a trial by fire. We discovered that a place of shared grief can turn into a powerful force of change.
  - **We need to learn to NOT see members of the military as the opposition.** We need to learn more, visit our local VAs, associate with veterans, and become educated by association. Learning to *not* see members of the military as the opposition requires direct interaction with people. Association removes the “we-them” between us.
  - **Don’t hide behind the closed door of superiority.** A sense of superiority is usually implied when we talk about our Peace Testimony. This comes from an unrealistic, black-and-white, non-complicated view of conflict. Conflict is complicated.
  - **The Peace Testimony is simple, but working for peace is not.**
  - **Peace workers and the military often share the same sense of commitment,** courage, willingness to sacrifice self, and willingness to continue despite uncertainty and risk. There is something especially powerful about a skilled soldier choosing peace as an option, whether for idealistic reasons or because it works better.
  - **Peace-making on the retail level.** Quakers have a long history of individuals acting on behalf of the Peace Testimony amid the confusion of times of war. Some Quakers were disowned by their meetings and some were hanged by their neighbors because of the stands they took on behalf of the Peace Testimony. It’s hard to imagine what it felt like and how confusing it must have been to be a Quaker and to support the Peace Testimony during the Civil War or during the Revolutionary War. It would have been very hard to know what was the right thing to do and what was God calling Friends to do.
  - **I hope that this is the beginning of a conversation and not the end.** Thank you to Western Friend for bringing us together.