

12 Quakers and Equality

1. The writer says equality is at heart of his/her Quaker beliefs and values. This is because social science has shown how people react to differences in wealth and power and to equality and inequality. The poor have more stress hormones and unhealthy blood fats, leading to heart disease and reduced life expectancy. There is three times as much mental illness in less equal countries. More hierarchical and unequal societies show less respect between men and women, more racism and domestic violence.
2. The writer was brought up to consider herself special, with compassion for people of differing abilities, but not to consider them equals. When she came to Quakers, her attitudes were challenged as she found herself in a non- hierarchical community. Work with the homeless led to a realisation that equality means we are all special.
3. The writer feels the Quaker testimony to equality has helped us to see that the “light within” is the sole guide for each of us. It is difficult to lead life without racism and prejudice but in the stillness and quiet of worship, reflection on Jesus’ teaching to “love God and my neighbour as myself” helps strengthen resolve.
4. The writer feels that the biblical declaration that we are all made in the image of God means we are all equal. But equality is not the same as uniformity and differences can present challenges – as in the writer’s initial hostility to women wearing the *niqab*. It takes time to change ancient prejudices – courage and the skill of honesty are needed. Quakers have a testimony to truth, without which we cannot live equally.
5. The writer had been involved with schemes to help homeless people get accommodation. to help women caught in the benefits trap get low cost loans, and community furniture projects. The need to consider our effect on the poorest in society was emphasised especially not consuming more than our fair share of resources.
6. The writer was a schoolteacher who had written musical plays about mental health issues, George Fox’s imprisonment in Worcester Gaol and pieces about John Woolman and Elizabeth Fry for the Quaker Festival Orchestra and Chorus. Involvement in restorative justice, struggle for human rights and equal opportunities policy are given as examples of modern Quaker concerns.

7. The writer appreciates the way equality is rooted in Quaker communal worship and our concept of equal worth is measured in humanity not status or wealth. The honours system (MBE, OBE, CBE etc.) is given as an example of how inequality is still accepted as a way of the world – as is the use of terms like “illegal migrant” and “asylum seeker”.

8. The writer is gay and as a teenager felt rejected by religion but later found Quakers welcoming and accepting. An example of equality in action was the way dissenting views were dealt with in a meeting of 800 people discussing possible revision of our book of discipline.

9. The writer had initial problems around the word “God” but had a conviction that there is a spiritual dimension to life, manifested in the mystery of the cosmos, beauty in nature and art and the love human beings can show. The writer was shocked by a Quaker who showed pity for agnostics and atheists. It was felt equality can be about respecting and responding to differences as when a women’s group was set up in a Quaker Meeting. It was felt that modern capitalism’s emphasis on materialism is not compatible with true happiness in a society.

10. The writer distinguishes between a religious conviction that every person has the potential to experience God and the political claim for equal rights for all. To embrace equal opportunities, we must refrain from prejudiced judgements about the different life journeys of others. The writer was inspired by the example of John (sic William) Howard and Elizabeth Fry to become a prison visitor and feels offenders are often abused with rough justice in the media.

The work of many Quakers for the Prison Reform Trust is seen as an example of our testament to Equality in action.

11. The writer considers the protestant work ethic has led to a widespread acceptance of inequality because it implies “the rich are rich because of hard work and the poor are idle and undeserving – God helping those who help themselves” A different kind of Christianity was found in the bible where Jesus is opposed to worldly ambition and inequality is rejected – race and gender are irrelevant. The great equalising experience of death is found oddly comforting. Quakers have shown the writer the inward conditioning of Christ revealing the valuation of others as superior or inferior as delusional and reorienting away from another people’s view of him/her toward God.

12. The female writer experienced gender inequality when she grew up in a church with entirely male clergy from bishops down to pastors of the smallest churches. As a 13-year-old she was told her influence in the church would be exercised through her father, husband (for such there surely would be) and her brothers (which she thought a joke). In later life she found Quakers where from the earliest days of the movement women were never treated as spiritually second rate and she was delighted to wholly accepted as a woman.