

The Quaker legacy of peace

by William C. Kashatus

Once again, the Quakers have given Philadelphians a gift, this one just in time for the Thanksgiving holiday.

Visitors to the Arch Street Friends Meeting House will be treated to a poignant exhibit called "Quiet Helpers: Quaker Service in Postwar Germany."

Through rare photographs and personal artifacts, the exhibit tells the story of Quaker humanitarianism and the American Friends Service Committee after both world wars and during the Nazi era. It is a moving — and somewhat controversial — story that earned the Society of Friends the respect and admiration of countless refugees in war-torn Europe and, in 1947, the Nobel Peace Prize itself.

The Quaker commitment to peace began in the mid-17th century when their founder George Fox sent a written declaration to King Charles II of England proclaiming that Friends "utterly deny all outward wars for any end, or under any pretense whatever."

Over the next three centuries, this unconditional rejection of violence became a fundamental article of Quaker faith, emphasizing the spiritual worth of each person and the path of love as the most lasting way to resolve conflict between people. That pacifism emerged in the 20th century as the most distinctive belief of Quakers is largely due to the work of the American Friends Service Committee.

Founded in Philadelphia in 1917, AFSC was originally established to provide conscientious objectors with a constructive alternative to military service and to aid civilian victims during World War I. Stating their desire to offer "a service of love in wartime," Friends offered their services to the United States government "in any constructive work in which they could conscientiously serve humanity."

Henry J. Cadbury, a professor at Haverford College who was instrumental in

founding the AFSC, joined his involvements in both institutions. Conscientious objectors were trained at the small Main Line college and formed into a Reconstruction Unit under the auspices of the American Red Cross for service in war-torn Europe. That first summer, about 100 young men and women — Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren and others — staffed hospitals and orphanages; rebuilt homes, factories and farms, and provided material relief in France and Russia.

But as neutralist sentiment faded in the United States, patriotic fervor spread, encouraged by an elaborate government campaign to whip up enthusiasm for the war. Intolerance for dissent and a stifling intellectual conformity followed. Cadbury became a victim of those circumstances.

In an October 1918 letter to the Philadelphia Public Ledger, the Haverford College professor denounced U.S. war policies and the American public's pro-war attitude. His pleas for "moderation" and "fair play" — as well as his hauntingly accurate prediction that "a peace on any other terms will be no peace at all, but the curse of the future" — were lost on an incensed public.

Cries for his dismissal followed. Cadbury was suspended by the college and a year later accepted a position at Andover Theological Seminary. But he continued to work for the AFSC.

During the next few years, American Friends, with Cadbury's enthusiastic support, involved themselves in post-war reconstruction in Germany, Poland and Russia, repairing farm machinery, planting thousands of fruit trees, distributing medicine and feeding millions of starving children.

After World War II, the AFSC engaged in more specialized services: developing small community centers for the dislocated in Germany, France and Japan; establishing small industries in Finland, and repairing transportation systems in Italy.

So vital were these efforts to recon-

structing war-torn Europe that the AFSC, along with the British Friends Service Council, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947 for "demonstrating a way of life founded on faith in the victory of spirit over force."

Cadbury himself accepted the honor for the AFSC, appearing at the ceremony in Oslo in a tuxedo he borrowed from the AFSC material aids program.

Since 1947, AFSC has worked to broaden society's understanding of pacifism.

It has taught us that peace can no longer be defined as the absence of organized violence and the relief of human suffering but that it is necessary to understand the conditions for making and maintaining peace. Pacifism involves a critical appreciation for human rights, a careful understanding of how social justice can be served and the conditions under which developing nations can flourish.

That is why the AFSC currently directs volunteer efforts to address domestic poverty in farm labor camps, mining communities, on Indian reservations and on the streets of our inner cities. Just as important are the committee's overseas efforts where it supports community development projects in Africa, Latin America, Kosovo and the Middle East.

The strength and beauty of the AFSC is that it has always been directed by a genuine spirit of love towards others. It is the kind of moral leadership we all keep hoping to find in our contemporary society, for it has shown us that a little love, enduringly practiced, can go a very long way.

The exhibit "Quiet Helpers" will run through January 2001 and is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., at the Arch Street Meeting House at 4th and Arch. There is no admission charge. For more information, call 888-588-2372.

William C. Kashatus is a professional historian at the Chester County Historical Society.



THE DAILY VIEWS ~ OP/ED