

# 12 Friends Testimonies

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*Begin this session with worship sharing or a time of reflection on the question, "How do I put my faith into action?" Then present the following information.*

Friends realize that life is holy, that anyone anywhere can experience God's presence directly, and that revelation is continuing. These realizations are reflected in their values of simplicity, integrity, harmony, community, equality, and diversity, which are essential in their search for Truth. As Friends try to live their values, they witness or give testimony to the world.

Friends testimonies are outward expressions of God's leadings. They are the application of Friends values to situations in their personal lives and in the corporate life of the Religious Society of Friends. Friends testimonies are action-oriented. They are not just philosophical views but commitments Friends make and attempt to follow in all aspects of their lives.

Friends testimonies express their relationships with God and among people and come from Friends struggles to live their values, according to their understanding and ability. They are responses Friends make to their life experiences. George Fox did not, for example, have a revelation about nonviolence. He was asked to join the army, and he refused. That occurred in the decade after Quakerism began and was the beginning of the Friends Peace Testimony. Douglas Gwyn wrote, "These early testimonies . . . began simply as those things which Friends could no longer do without diminishing or even belying the message of Christ's salvation that they preached."<sup>61</sup> In the words of Beckey Phipps, "Our testimonies are stories, individually and corporately, of how our spirits (with a small letter 's') have been transformed by the Spirit (with a capital 'S'). Testimonies are stories of experience of lives lived in the presence of God."<sup>62</sup>

The story of Elizabeth Fry is an example of a life lived in the presence of God. Elizabeth was a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English Quaker. A few months after the birth of her eleventh child, she became aware of the terrible conditions at Newgate Prison, a prison for convicted women and their children. The women and children, some ill and in rags, without bedding or washing facilities, were treated brutally by the jailers and each other. When Elizabeth arrived to visit the prison, the jailers, afraid for their own safety, would not accompany her into the area where the prisoners were held. Elizabeth began her first visit by asking the women if

<sup>61</sup> Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), p. 141.

<sup>62</sup> Personal communication, winter 2002.

they would like her to start a school for their children. Receiving an overwhelmingly positive response, her safety among the inmates was, henceforth, assured.

Elizabeth brought the inmates clothes and straw for bedding. She insisted that the jailers allow the women to wash their clothes—the jailers had previously believed that the inmates were not interested in cleanliness. She taught the women to sew and arranged for them to sell the clothes and quilts they produced and keep the profits. Such prison reforms were previously unheard of. When the House of Commons asked her to give evidence of conditions at Newgate, Elizabeth Fry became the first English woman, other than the Queen, to advise the English parliament.

Friends recognize that their lives speak. Therefore, their religion is a way of life for them. With the assistance and support of their communities, Friends try to discern God's leadings and live accordingly. Friends do not measure success in visible achievements. Their measure for success is whether they have done their best to discern and follow God's direction in their lives. There is a saying among Friends that "they let God be the clerk of the Outcomes Committee." As a consequence, Friends tend to remain hopeful even if the results of their leadings do not appear to be "successful" by popular standards.

A life of service is the natural result of Friends testimonies. Service is the living out of their testimonies. In 1960, London Yearly Meeting wrote,

Service is not a department of life, something outside the main current of personal living. It is sometimes deliberate, but more often is involved unconsciously in the sheer quality of the soul displayed in ordinary occupations. In our social and recreational activities our gladness and peace of mind will influence others. Special gifts will bring special opportunities and duties. These we shall not think of as tasks to be performed; they will be the natural outcome of our love of others.<sup>63</sup>

As they have attempted to answer that of God in everyone, Friends have found that their common values unite them and find expression in their testimonies. Friends regret that they do not always succeed in living their testimonies; nonetheless, they continue to strive for them. Friends recognize that, no matter what has happened, it is always important to try to do the next right thing. George Fox gave the following instruction, which is the basis of Friends testimonies: "Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in everyone."<sup>64</sup>

### Discussion Questions

- Which Friends testimony that we have studied—honesty, integrity, simplicity, diversity, community, peace, and social action—speaks most clearly to you?
- In what ways have you had the opportunity to serve others?

<sup>63</sup> *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*, #594.

<sup>64</sup> *The Journal of George Fox*, p. 263.