On the occasion of the centenary of World War I, Quakers in Australia reaffirm our commitment to peace and our abhorrence of war and violence. The testimony to peace by of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) was made explicit in a declaration to Charles II in 1660:

*Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace ...*

*We ... testify to the whole world, that the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.*

The peace testimony is based on a central tenet of Quakerism – the belief that there is that of God, or an inner light, in everyone.

War and violent conflict can be seen as a human failure – a failure at all levels in our society, from personal to national, to relate to one another with understanding, empathy, respect, honesty and fairness. This failure can arise from fear and personal and national insecurity. Whilst acknowledging the sacrifices of our service men and women, we also recognise the sufferings of many others, the dislocation of society, and the lasting trauma that war brings to all those affected, whether in the war zone or at home. We pay tribute to all the concerned citizens around the world who have campaigned for peace, and continue to do so.

**Impact of War**

At the time, the Great War was understood as having exacted such carnage and destruction that it was regarded as the ‘war to end all wars’.

There were estimated to have been 37 million casualties, including 16 million deaths (combatants and civilians). Millions of civilians died of starvation or disease. From an Australian population of less than five million, just under 420,000 men enlisted, of whom 1 in 7 were killed and 1 in 3 wounded, gassed, or taken prisoner. Many children grew up with parents who had been damaged by the war.

We know that war also causes untold damage to other forms of life, the environment, to people’s homes and livelihoods, essential infrastructure, and the loss of irreplaceable cultural treasures. People fleeing conflicts sometimes need to seek sanctuary or asylum in another country. Sadly, more recent violent conflicts are producing more and more war victims and refugees. Quakers in Australia have expressed their concern about the punitive and inhumane policies of successive Australian governments towards asylum seekers, and call instead for policies that are just and fair.

An appropriate commemoration of the war would be for us, as a nation, to make steps toward better regional and international understanding and conflict management in the hope of avoiding further wastage of life.

**Commemoration of the WWI Centenary**

A theme of the Australian Government’s commemoration is recognition of a ‘century of service’ – from the Boer War to the present day – and we encourage the Government to support an examination of all aspects of wars, beyond military history. Such an examination would increase our understanding of the origins of war, the human suffering and other costs, treatment of prisoners of war, aliens, and refugees, the tendency to demonise and fear the other, post-conflict reconciliation, and prevention – as well as the acts of conscience to oppose war and conscription. The forebears of many Australians lived in other countries or war zones, and we wish to recognise their experience too. With the frequent reference to the ‘Anzac tradition’ and naming the Centenary the ‘Anzac’ Centenary, there is a need for self-reflection and questioning of myths about the significance of Australia’s military engagements.

**Quakers and WWI**

Following the conclusion of the Boer War, Quakers in Australia in 1902 declared that ‘preparations for war, instead of contributing to peace, produce suspicion, jealousy, and mistrust between the nations’ and appealed ‘for the settlement of international differences by judicial tribunals instead of
by resorting to fire and sword.\(^9\) Some years later Quakers, together with local branches of the London Peace Society, the Australian Freedom League, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, some socialists and individual ministers of religion,\(^9\) opposed the introduction of compulsory military training in the Defence Bill of 1909.\(^10\) Youths as young as 15, who refused to attend drills, were imprisoned in military barracks such as the Queenscliff fortress in Melbourne.\(^11\) The provisions of the Defence Bill presented a predicament for the Friends' High School in Hobart, where the great majority of students were from non-Quaker families.\(^12\) Following the outbreak of WWI, newly-formed groups such as the Australian Peace Alliance, the Women’s Peace Army and the Union of Democratic Control for the Avoidance of War called for an end to the war. There was much broader community opposition to conscription for military service. Conscription referenda held in 1916 and 1917 were both defeated. In Britain, however, conscription was introduced in 1916 with provision for conscientious objection.\(^13\)

When faced with the reality of war, and threats to national and personal security, holding fast to the peace testimony can be a challenging test of our faith. In Britain, with increasing tensions in Europe, the Northern Friends Peace Board was established 'to advise and encourage Friends in the North and through them their fellow Christians and citizens generally in the active promotion of peace in all its height and breadth.'\(^14\) Quakers, with others in Britain and Europe, notably some women’s organisations, tried to prevent the outbreak of hostilities and subsequently sought to bring an end to the war, without revenge, to create a more lasting peace through freedom from fear.\(^15\) Young men not in protected occupations were faced with enlistment, or applying as a conscientious objector. Some Quakers ‘felt unable to take an active part in upholding the Testimony'\(^16\) and about a third of the young men from Quaker families enlisted.

In Europe, the Friends War Victims Relief Committee was established in 1870, to help relieve the suffering of all victims of the war – soldiers, civilians, and refugees - and continued through and beyond WWI. The Friends Ambulance Unit was formed in Britain within weeks of the outbreak of WWI. Young men from Australia, and from other countries, worked with both organisations.\(^17\)

Following WW1

Maintaining their faith, Quakers continued to campaign for peace and a less militaristic, more just society and harmonious international relations. Relief work continued in Europe, the Spanish Civil War and throughout WWII, with support from Quakers in Australia and elsewhere. In 1947 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Friends Service Council (UK) and the American Friends Service Committee in recognition of their work. 'Quakers have shown us ... that rich expression of the sympathy between all men, regardless of nationality or race, which transformed into deeds, must form the basis for lasting peace.'\(^19\)

Building the Peace and Prevention of War

The 'tensions and complexities of war'\(^20\) over a century have also led to significant developments such as international agreements on disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, cooperation, and the formation of institutions, such as the UN,\(^21\) for peace-building, peace-keeping, relief and reconstruction, and reconciliation.

Quakers in Australia are committed to working co-operatively towards removing the causes of war and promoting non-violent methods of addressing conflict at all levels, such as through the Alternatives to Violence Project\(^22\) and Friends Peace Teams.\(^23\) Our many concerns include: the protection of asylum seekers, reconciliation with indigenous people, US bases in Australia, the arms trade, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, human rights, for example in West Papua, food security, sustainability, earth care and ethical investment. Through Quaker Service Australia we try to express, in a practical way, our concern for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world.\(^24\)

Fair and honest relationships, respect and peacemaking need to be the basis of our relations with other nations. At home, the onus is on all of us to bring about more understanding between citizens of different social and cultural backgrounds,\(^25\) to remove unwarranted suspicion and fear, and to acknowledge and celebrate the contribution we can all make to a healthy, diverse and harmonious society.

Let us all go forth in a spirit of love and truth and peace, answering to that same spirit in everyone.
REFERENCES

3. WWI Casualties http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/World_War_I_casualties.html
10. The Defence Bill of 1909, an amendment to the [Australian] Defence Act 1903-10, provided for school-based physical training for 12-14 year olds (junior cadets), military drill for 14-18 year olds (senior cadets), and adult training for 18-20 year olds in the citizen forces.
12. Oats, William Nicolle. The Rose and the Waratah: The Friends’ School Hobart 1832-1945. The School Committee eventually decided that students participating in military drill should not wear their cadet uniforms at school. The Scouts at the school is said to have satisfied the requirement for junior cadets.
13. The Military Services Act of 27 January 1916 provided for compulsory military service and came into force on 2 March 1916. Ireland was excluded. This was the first time in British military history that conscription had been introduced. Pearce Cyril (2002) Comrades in Conscience: The Story of an English Community’s Opposition to the Great War, Francis Boult; Quaker historian Jo Vellacott (2007) Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote: The Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain During the First World War, Palgrave Macmillan.
20. MAPW op. cit., p.4 quoting from Anzac Centenary website (in 2010)
24. Quaker Service Australia www.qsa.org.au
25. Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee (2010) submission to the National Commission on the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary

RESOURCES

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia. www.quakers.org.au
Quaker Service Australia. www.qsa.org.au
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) Britain Yearly Meeting. www.quakers.org.uk