



The Friends' School, Hobart – Quakerism in Practice

by Nelson File, Principal

February 2016

More than 300 years ago, William Penn fashioned a 'Holy Experiment' in the newly founded colony of Pennsylvania (Penn's Woods) based on his conviction in Quakerism. In the seventeenth-century world framed by intolerance, dogma and a rigid class system, Penn established his colony dedicated to the principles of religious tolerance, the rule of law through a written constitution, equality and harmony among all. Penn realised that the continuing success of his colony relied upon a 'guarded, virtuous and useful' education of its youth to create the 'just' society he envisioned. George Fox first proposed in 1667 that two boarding schools should be established by Quakers, one for boys and one for girls, for the purpose of instructing them "in all things civil and useful in creation".

Penn requested that schools be formed and some local Monthly Meetings, mostly in Philadelphia, took up the challenge in order to educate all children – Quaker and non-Quaker in the new colony. Three Friends schools have remained in continuous operation since Penn's request in the late 1600's– William Penn Charter School (1687), Friends Select School (1687) and Abington Friends School (1697). Currently around 40 other Quaker schools are in operation in Philadelphia. His vision was to create a just and virtuous society where all could live in harmony.

I graduated from Abington Friends School and have grown to recognise a link with Penn's 'Holy Experiment' and our work here at **The Friends' School** in Hobart, where we also seek to foster an educational environment that will contribute to the development of a 'just and virtuous' society.

Like nearly every Quaker School throughout the world of the same tradition, **Friends'** has a spiritual and value centred philosophy, which we articulate through the *Purpose and Concerns*. The *Purpose and Concerns* serves as the guiding document in all aspects of **The Friends' School**.

The Friends' School is a co-educational Quaker school based on fundamental values such as the intrinsic worth of each person, the recognition of 'that of God' in everyone, the desirability of simplicity and the need to establish peace and justice.

As a learning community, we are concerned for the academic, cultural, physical, social and spiritual development of each person in our care.

We seek to help our students develop into men and women who will think clearly, act with integrity, make decisions for themselves, be sensitive to the needs of others and the environment, be strong in service and hold a global perspective.

We believe that these aims can best be achieved with the active support of all members of our School community.

By seeking to help the students develop into men and women who will think clearly, act with integrity, make decisions for themselves, be sensitive to the needs of others and the



environment, be strong in service and hold a global perspective, the **School** is aiming to develop a community filled with positive, contributing members of society who will seek to create a more just world.

Penn's vision, which was based upon George Fox's initial concepts, was also centred on the usefulness of the education provided. To again quote Penn:

For their learning be liberal ... but let it be useful knowledge, such as is consistent with Truth and Godliness, not cherishing a vain conversation or idle mind, but ingenuity mixed with industry is good for the body and mind too. I recommend the useful part of mathematics as building houses or ships, measuring, surveying, dialling, navigation; but agriculture is especially in my eye; let my children be husbandmen and housewives... This leads to consider the works of God and nature, or things that are good and diverts the mind from being taken up with vain arts and inventions of a luxurious world.

The initial advertisement placed in the Hobart newspaper in 1887 for student enrolment at **The Friends' School** alluded to the practical nature of the education on offer:

*Friends' School
For Boys and Girls
Warwick Street
Under the care of a Committee of Hobart Monthly Meeting
S. Clemes, Principal*

The object of the Institution is to give a guarded Christian education, with a course of instruction leading up to the examinations under the Council of Education. Special attention will be given to the study of the Natural Sciences by means of a Laboratory and varied scientific apparatus.

The situation of the School premises is elevated, open and healthy, and within a five minute walk of the Friends' Meeting, which the scholars will attend ...

The Curriculum will include the usual English subjects together with Algebra, Geometry, Latin, French, Freehand Drawing, Physics and Chemistry (with Laboratory practice). Other subjects can be taught, but must specially be arranged for. In Chemistry and Physics the lessons will be thoroughly practical, and every scholar in the upper classes will have an opportunity of learning Chemical Analysis. The girls will be taught plain needlework during the time devoted to Latin by the boys.

The Friends' School has evolved since its founding, but it has also remained grounded in its original mission of offering a broadly based education that contributes to a well rounded society. It has matured in the concept of a 'guarded Christian education' to mean one centred upon Quaker beliefs.

Knowing if the philosophical basis for the School has been fulfilled can be a difficult proposition. In 2014, Old Scholars were asked in a survey to reflect upon the impact that **The Friends' School** ethos has had upon their life. Around 500 Old Scholars responded and below are a selection of their comments.



In everything I do The Friends' School impacts my life decisions - "Let my life speak", "There is that of God in everyone".... If anything The Friends' School experience has affected me too much. I believe that everyone in this world is as dedicated, as honest, is working towards the best possible experiences for others as my teachers and my classmates at Friends'; and I am often disappointed in how other people behave and act.

Although I am not religious at all, I deliberately uphold elements of the Quaker ethos in my life: a commitment to pacifism, consensus and non-hierarchical structures. I really believe that Friends' instilled these values at a crucial time in my life.

I am a practising Anglican, not a Quaker, but I find that certain 'Quakerly principles' have remained in my thinking and blend well with my Christian faith: finding good in each individual, appreciating difference, living simply and being careful with material resources, a concern for world peace and justice, an interest in international relations and other cultures, a sense of the importance of community.

Respect for others no matter where they originate. The philosophy of the Society of Friends has impacted on my life.

I have found that the Quaker principles of community, simplicity and integrity have carried through with me into my university studies. I try to make sure that these principles guide all the decisions that I make.

It wasn't until later in my adult life that I came to appreciate how much the Quaker ethos had permeated my value system and strongly influenced important decisions in my life. In particular, I believe my strong interest in environmental sustainability and social justice can be attributed in a large part to my Friends' School experience.

Not all comments were positive, however, as there were some alternate views offered:

Not at all.

It hasn't.

Very little.

Yes. I will never be a Quaker.

Not really.

It hasn't made much difference.

The contributed comments were about 9 to 1 positive/neutral to negative by the Old Scholars.

I have heard that criticism exists within Australian Friends that **The Friends' School** charges fees for its students' education. We as Quakers live "in the world", not separate from the world as other religious groups might. As a consequence, **The Friends' School** is also "in the world". As such, the **School** has expenses it must meet— teacher and staff salaries, curricular materials, utilities, insurance, care and renovations of buildings, etc. If the **School** had a large enough endowment where no student fees were required to



meet the operating costs, then I am confident the Board of Governors would be happy to charge no tuition fees. However, that is not currently the case.

Is it not better to have an institution within Australia where Quaker beliefs and traditions are put into practice on a daily basis in the hopes of educating generations of students that might strive to make the world a more “just and virtuous” society than not?

I will close this essay with a final quote from William Penn:

*If we would mend the World, we should mend Ourselves;
and teach our Children to be, not what we are, but what they should be.*