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Prophetic, Persistent, Powerful

Bridget Moix September 1, 2018



Participants in the 1964 annual meeting of FCNL's General Committee at the 4-H Center in Washington, D.C.

“Why try to work uphill for peace, justice, and freedom on Capitol Hill at a time when cynicism about the character and operation of government and government officials is widespread ... ? Because religion should be vital and relevant and because the health and the future of our democracy rest upon responsible participation by informed and concerned citizens.”

—E. Raymond Wilson, *Uphill for Peace: Quaker Impact on Congress* (1974)

I find myself returning again and again to these words from the first head (executive secretary) of Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL).

Looking back on three decades of lobbying, he wrote them the same year I was born. His words sum up my experience of advocacy as a Friend—especially today when many are deeply troubled by our government’s actions and are feeling a profound calling to insist on change.

I reflected on these words this spring, as I worshiped with others in the FCNL community at the Quaker Hill Conference Center in Richmond, Indiana. Seventy-five years earlier, Friends had gathered in the space—in the same room where we sat—under the weight of their concerns for the state of the world, the role of their government, and a felt call to put their faith into action. Those visionary yet practical, prophetic yet pragmatic Friends created the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

Friends engagement with policy and politics is much older and more expansive than one organization, of course. As Margery Post Abbott writes in *A Theological Perspective on Quaker Lobbying*, “Quakers have worked to influence the government almost as long as there have been Friends,” going back to the seventeenth century when Friends were imprisoned for their beliefs.

The creation of FCNL in the twentieth century represented a renewed dedication to bring Quaker beliefs to bear on our country’s governing decisions. In the collective

work uphill for peace, I want to acknowledge what FCNL has given to my life, to Friends, and to our world. Most importantly, I want to share what this growing community has to offer to the Religious Society of Friends and to our democratic process.



Shaping Wise and Right Legislation: FCNL's Founding

The 52 Friends who gathered at Quaker Hill in June 1943 were motivated particularly by the ongoing war in Europe, the imposition of government on the rights of conscience of individuals, and the injustices of race and class that were bubbling up in the United States.

Imagine the realities of Friends during World War II, and the courage it took to decide, in the words of FCNL's founding declaration, that "we, as Friends, have a responsibility to contribute as best we may to the shaping of wise, and right, legislation."

This group of farmers, pastors, and Quaker leaders were primarily from Indiana and Ohio. It was not a cross section of American Quakerism at the time, both for logistic and philosophical reasons. Yet these 16 women and 36 men, representing 15 yearly meetings, created a structure for raising Friends concern with the U.S. government that has proven to be both adaptive and generative, able to respond to shifting concerns and to provide a model for Friends advocacy in other arenas.

FCNL's founding was an act of hope, and a particularly Quaker one in its approach to lobbying. From its beginning, FCNL was oriented toward long-term change. As E. Raymond Wilson wrote, "We ought to be willing to work for causes which will not be won now, but cannot be won in the future unless the goals are staked out now and worked for energetically over a period of time."

Friends carefully differentiated FCNL from "pressure groups" governed by their own self-interest. In the 1944 Statement of Legislative Policy, FCNL's General Committee stated that its advocacy "ought to be carried out in harmony with the spirit and practices of Friends as a religious, not a political body. In approaching this task we should seek both prophetic vision and practical wisdom."

This fall, I will sit at the head of FCNL's seventy-fourth annual meeting, serving as its clerk. As I look out over this gathering, I will be aware of the twin legacies of FCNL's founding. This is an organization dedicated to working on issues and for values central to Friends. Our policy recommendations rise out of our belief that there is that of God in every person and that all creation has worth and dignity. Since its founding, FCNL has played an important role in major government decisions related to peace, justice, and a sustainable planet.

In addition, this is an organization committed to advocating in a manner consistent with those values. This approach tries to embody the best of Quakerism: grounded in relationships that lift up that of God in each person, and committed to building those relationships for the long term. Lobbying with FCNL involves listening and an awareness of the possibility of transformation.



Quaker Lobbying Today

Politics and the concerns of Friends have changed over 75 years, and FCNL has changed with them. New issues, such as climate change, mass incarceration, and drone warfare, have emerged as concerns, leading FCNL to seek out additional expertise to lobby and support the organization. Constituent voices have become more powerful in swaying members of Congress, and FCNL has developed new ways of encouraging advocacy at the local level, such as FCNL Advocacy Teams, which work locally to lobby and build relationships with members of Congress. FCNL's integrity and approach to advocacy has attracted new people—both Quakers and others—who want to put their values into practice through a Quaker organization.

This advocacy has also become a way for young adults to grow as leaders within the Religious Society of Friends, as well as the political arena more generally. In the 1970s, young Friends asked FCNL to give them ways to help end the Vietnam War. Today, the Young Fellows Program has provided an avenue for hundreds of young people to support FCNL's faith-based advocacy and to develop as young professionals.

This program is how I first came to FCNL in 1996. FCNL is where I began my career in doing policy change work for peace and justice. To this day, it feels like my spiritual and professional home. I'm excited that FCNL is investing in young adults in new and lasting ways and providing more opportunities for young people to experience the power of Quaker advocacy through Spring Lobby Weekend, organizing fellowships, and more.

With all this evolution, the organization's foundation remains strong. FCNL has been blessed with stable leadership, with just four people serving as its head over 75 years: E. Raymond Wilson (1943–1961), Ed Snyder (1962–1990), Joe Volk (1990–2012), and Diane Randall (2012–present). FCNL's governing committee includes Friends from 30 yearly meetings and Friends groups nationwide. The practice of soliciting input from Friends meetings and churches across the country to set its legislative agenda ensures FCNL's continued grounding in the Religious Society of Friends.

FCNL's persistence and dedication to long-term advocacy also remains an essential characteristic. Nearly 20 years ago, I was part of a gathering called by the British Friends Service Council in the aftermath of Kosovo. Representatives from FCNL, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), and other Quaker groups gathered in London to look at how Friends can respond after violence begins. Out of that discussion, we realized that once the bombs were falling, the peacebuilding was too late. We had to focus on preventing violence, not just responding to it.

In 2002, I came back to FCNL to work on foreign policy, and we started lobbying on just that issue. It was difficult to get attention on Capitol Hill for the idea that the United States should invest in prevention. But that was FCNL's work: to be present to this truth that nobody was yet ready to listen to.

Fast forward to this year, 2018: The U.S. House of Representatives passed a bipartisan bill called the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, which gives the United States some of the tools it needs for prevention. Members of Congress from both parties spoke about the need for prevention during the bill's debate. We've come a long way from the blank looks the word "prevention" elicited when FCNL first started to raise the concept with Congress.

FCNL's persistent advocacy is not the only factor behind this bill's passage. Militarism is still dominant in U.S. foreign policy. Too often the United States does not own up to its role in fueling violence around the world. I know, however, that FCNL's ability to work for long-term change over years and decades is making a difference in this area as in others.





FCNL's reputation and persistent advocacy gives Friends an invaluable standing among policymakers. Yet even as we appreciate the past and recognize the power it gives us, the inevitable question is, what now?

U.S. politics today is chaotic and uncertain. The Trump administration is dismantling government institutions and protections that have been integral to our society for decades. Militarism and white supremacist ideas are on the rise. The Internet and media landscape make it easier than ever for people to surround themselves with people like themselves. The Religious Society of Friends is mirroring the polarization and fracturing of our country as a whole.

Yet I still believe that Friends principles and practices have something important to offer. FCNL's history shows that our response to uncertainty and fear is not to retreat but to consider how we can step into those spaces and bring about change. The value of listening and speaking to that of God in everyone we encounter is the only way forward, even when we can't see clearly where these practices will lead.

In the years ahead, FCNL will advance policies that reflect Friends' desire for peace and justice. It is significantly expanding its network of Friends, activists, and organizational partners around the country; increasing its visibility, reach, and media presence; building stronger relationships with members of the Religious Society of Friends; and paying increased attention to the sustainability of the organization and infrastructure. FCNL has already lasted 75 years; we need to develop this precious resource so that it lasts another 75 years or more.

FCNL will continue to grow and evolve, remaining grounded in our Quaker faith even as we seek to become more diverse. Both staff and governance committees are working to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization. These efforts will bring new challenges and opportunities for change as we strive to ensure that our internal practices live up to our mission to create "a society with equity and justice for all."

Already, FCNL is creating possibilities for dialogue and relationship building at the newly opened Quaker Welcome Center. Adjacent to FCNL's office, this space offers a place for meetings, events, worship, and advocacy training every week. Recent events include a bipartisan dialogue about climate change between two representatives, and an interfaith prayer gathering in support of a U.S.-North Korea summit. These events continue FCNL's long tradition of providing neutral space for conversation on Capitol Hill as well as an oasis of silence and reflection.

The future of FCNL and the mission Friends created 75 years ago is remarkably hopeful. While the state of U.S. policy and politics in Washington and what we see in our own communities threatens our belief in the fundamental goodness of the human spirit, I am continually revived and re-energized. I know that our work to change our government's laws and practices is part of a much larger movement: one that began before us and will continue long after we have passed the work on to others.

Indeed, the path of prophetic pragmatism laid out by FCNL's founders continues today with a growing and thriving organization, a community spanning generations and communities around the country, and a commitment deeply grounded in faith. FCNL began, remains today, and will continue to be prophetic, persistent, and powerful.

Bridget Moix is a member of Friends Meeting of Washington (D.C.) and serves as the clerk of FCNL's General Committee. She has worked for more than two decades on international peace and conflict issues with a focus on U.S. foreign policy.

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One thought on "Prophetic, Persistent, Powerful"



Don Crawford says:

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Harrisonburg, VA

If true, Bridget Moix's assertion "The Religious Society of Friends is mirroring the polarization and fracturing of our country as a whole." is frightening. If Quakers along with other "peace churches" can't set a civil tone for discourse we have lost the high ground and can't be the shining example for others to follow. Perhaps because I belong to a small Meeting in rural Shenandoah Valley of VA, I don't see the polarization among Friends. My Quaker relationships outside of the local Meeting involve the Baltimore Yearly Meeting Camping program. An inclusive gathering of campers, counselors, adult volunteers from all over and from among many different worshiping traditions. These folks offer the polar opposite to Moix's statement.
