

Article

# The Quaker Sanctuary Tradition †

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† This article is based on primary and secondary research, including participant observation and interviews, in the United States, United Kingdom, and France.

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**Abstract:** In the beginning of the Religious Society of Friends, in the seventeenth century, Quakers sought sanctuary from persecution in England and its American colonies. Later they provided sanctuary to people fleeing persecution, slavery, and war in many countries. They base their humanitarian efforts on five Testimonies and their core beliefs in the inner light of God in every person and the primacy of individual conscience. Often their sanctuary activities have led them into conflict with repressive governments and religious authorities. Their relief work with refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants, sometimes under dangerous conditions, earned them the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947. Despite their small numbers, Quakers have continued to play leadership roles in humanitarian initiatives up to the present day. Their sanctuary tradition has now flourished for more than 350 years.

**Keywords:** Religious Society of Friends; Quakers; sanctuary; migrants; humanitarian relief; refugees

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*“We are the people above all others who must stand in the gap.”*

—William Penn (quoted by [Corbett 1986a](#), p. 3)

## 1. Introduction

Sanctuary—refuge or assistance to people fleeing persecution, slavery, war, or criminal accusation—is an ancient institution and practice, perhaps as old as our species. Long before Christianity existed, it was honored in many religious traditions and societies. From the sixth to the seventeenth century CE, it was a recognized part of British law and society, provided by houses of worship and powerful authorities. In predominantly Catholic countries it had clearly defined constraints and regulations under canon and secular law. (See [Rabben \(2016\)](#) for a detailed account of the long and complex history of sanctuary.)

Over time, however, sanctuary became corrupt and discredited. Monarchs and secular authorities found it hampered their ability to exercise power and suppress challenges to their rule. The British Parliament abolished it in 1624. A few years later, at the beginning of the Religious Society of Friends (RSF), persecuted Quakers sought private sanctuary; later they gave it to others. Over their 350-year history they have developed “faith and practice” that provide the rationale for rescue, protection, and relief for people fleeing persecution and war in many countries.

Quakers do not base their faith and practice on a creed; instead they have five Testimonies—simplicity, peace, integrity, community, and equality—through which they strive to translate their convictions into action ([American Friends Service Committee 2011/2013](#)). With some 350,000 Quakers in the world (more than half in Africa), the Religious Society of Friends is more diverse than commonly believed. As a result of schisms in the nineteenth century and wide-ranging missionary activity in the twentieth century, today Quaker meetings range from unprogrammed (without liturgy or a pastor) to programmed, conservative, orthodox, or evangelical. But despite their

differences, almost all subscribe to the idea of the “light within, that of God in every person” and the primacy of individual conscience.

## 2. Findings

Quakers’ devotion to their Testimonies and their principled actions have brought them into conflict with secular and religious authorities over the centuries. Beginning in the 1640s, during the English Civil War, the RSF was an apocalyptic British sect led by charismatic figures who were prohibited from preaching publicly or privately. Friends who persisted in such activities were arrested, imprisoned, whipped, banished, and even executed. During the sect’s first 50 years some 15,000 Quakers were imprisoned, and about 450 died in British prisons. Even so, the sect spread rapidly from England to Ireland, Europe, and the American colonies.

Perhaps the first Quaker sanctuary was Swarthmoor Hall, Lancashire, the home of a wealthy sympathizer, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), who gave refuge to the sect’s founder, George Fox (1624–1691), and other leaders. After the death of her husband, a judge, Fell married Fox.

In spreading their faith, Quakers, including Fell and Fox, traveled widely and received hospitality from coreligionists and sympathizers. This was an important form of sanctuary because they were unwelcome in England and some American colonies. Four Quakers were executed in Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1659 and 1661. Under the Cart and Whip Act of 1660, Quakers were publicly whipped from town to town and exiled. Some fled to Rhode Island or Nantucket Island, where religious freedom helped them feel safer. An island near Barbados was purchased to serve as a sanctuary for Quakers.

William Penn (1644–1718), a wealthy and well-connected aristocrat, suffered repeated imprisonment as a young Quaker convert. He also rescued coreligionists from prison. As a result of his experiences of persecution, he decided to found a Quaker colony in the New World as a “holy experiment”: a sanctuary for religious dissidents. Pennsylvania was “the realization of a dream: to create a province built on Quaker values, religious and ethnic toleration, fraternity and peace” (Louis 2007, p. 69).

With the establishment of Pennsylvania in 1682 and the Toleration Act of 1689, Quakers found it easier to practice their faith in England and the British colonies. Subsequently they prospered. They dominated Pennsylvania economically and politically until the mid-eighteenth century. Famous for treating Native Americans humanely, as equals, they gave sanctuary to indigenous groups fleeing conflict with other indigenous groups and colonists. They also welcomed members of other dissenting religious sects.

Quakers withdrew from political life in Pennsylvania when the French and Indian War (1754–1763) put pressure on them to violate their pacifistic principles by forming militias to defend their settlements. Nevertheless, the RSF became known as the conscience of America, for its advancement of religious freedom, self-governance, human rights, and nonviolence. Their exercise of conscience often led Quakers to defy the secular law, secretly or openly.

Some Quakers were early opponents of slavery and the slave trade. Their first pronouncement against slavery emerged from Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1688. As early as 1693, followers of a Quaker minister in Philadelphia “published a tract asserting that slavery violated the Golden Rule; that the Bible commanded Christians not to return escaped captives into bondage; and that Friends should avoid slaves as prize goods taken in war” (Angell and Dandelion 2013, p. 348).

Perhaps because Quaker merchants benefited from the slave trade, the RSF took until the 1770s to condemn slavery unequivocally and expel members who traded or owned slaves. John Woolman (1720–1772) laid the groundwork for this decision. He convinced many coreligionists of the wrongness of slavery through gentle persuasion, which he exercised as a traveling minister who accepted Quaker hospitality in dangerous frontier regions. Beginning in the late eighteenth century several Quakers went further, rescuing slaves and helping them escape. Isaac Hopper (1771–1852) started assisting slaves as a young man in Philadelphia. He was later disowned by his meeting for his activities and his opposition to slavery.

Quakers founded the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1775. Its sanctuary efforts included offering legal aid to free blacks kidnapped into slavery and finding homes and jobs for slaves who had escaped from ships. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British Quakers also founded abolition societies and protected slaves who sought refuge. Few people at the time were willing to challenge slavery, which seemed to be an eternal institution. Quakers showed a rare level of conscientiousness by calling slavery wrong and taking action to end it.

Schisms over doctrine and slavery divided the Quaker community during most of the nineteenth century. Friends meetings were often segregated, if they had any black members at all. Even so, Quaker abolitionists played a prominent role in the Underground Railroad (UGRR), a widespread network that helped slaves escape from bondage. Many other Quakers did not approve of their sanctuary activities, which violated the Fugitive Slave Laws of 1793 and 1850. The abolitionists were “a small and non-representative minority within the Religious Society of Friends” (Angell and Dandelion 2013, p. 356). Nevertheless, Quaker UGRR “conductors,” such as Levi Coffin (1798–1877), Lucretia Mott (179–1880), and Thomas Garrett (178–1871), operated openly, working with black abolitionists to help thousands of slaves escape to the northern states or Canada.

The UGRR functioned from around 1800 until the early 1860s. Historians estimate that its conductors, black and white, free and slave, helped some 40,000 slaves (out of more than 4 million in bondage in 1860) to escape over that period. Because the movement was secret, decentralized, and illegal, exact numbers of Quaker and other “conductors” are unknown. Perhaps there were a few thousand. Quakers and other anti-slavery sympathizers in England also supported the UGRR by providing refuge to escaped slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, and sometimes freed them from their American owners by purchasing them.

Quakers based their opposition to slavery and support for the UGRR on their adherence to the Testimonies of equality and peace. UGRR conductor Levi Coffin told neighbors “that when a boy in North Carolina he had read in the Bible that it is right to take in the stranger and administer to him in distress, and he believed that it is always safe to do right; that the Bible, in bidding us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, said nothing about color, and that he should try to follow out its teachings” (Fernando Cartland, quoted by West (1990, p. 320)). Of the UGRR, Coffin declared, “The dictates of humanity came in opposition to the law of the land, and we ignored the law” (quoted by Yannessa 2001, p. 7).

Prosecuted and fined for harboring runaway slaves, Thomas Garrett said, “Judge, thou hast not left me a dollar, but if anyone knows a fugitive who wants a shelter and a friend, send him to Thomas Garrett and he will befriend him” (Bacon 1999, p. 119). Garrett took the name of the Religious Society of Friends literally, acting according to his interpretation of its Testimonies. This led him, like Coffin, to defy the secular law.

After the American Civil War (1861–1865), the Quakers became involved in diverse sanctuary efforts, helping the civilian victims and survivors of wars around the world. For example, they provided relief to women and child refugees during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the Boer War (1899–1902). The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the British Friends Service Council, founded during World War I, sent hundreds of relief workers to France, Germany, Austria, Poland, Serbia, Albania, and Russia between 1917 and 1921. Many were conscientious objectors, who refused to serve in the armed forces but enthusiastically participated in life-saving humanitarian initiatives such as providing food and shelter, nursing and transporting the wounded, and reconstructing devastated areas. Their wartime activities on behalf of combatants and civilians from all sides show how sanctuary providers circumvented secular authorities.

In the 1930s, the AFSC and other Quaker organizations assisted political dissidents and Jews who were trying to flee the Nazis. For example, in 1934 the Berlin Quaker Center “became a focal point for Jews who wanted to emigrate to the United States, while the Paris Center coped with the problems of some 4000 Jewish refugees, most in southern France” (Bacon 1999, p. 210). AFSC also had offices in Vienna, Rome, Lisbon, and North Africa.

The AFSC provided emergency services to refugees during and after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), accompanying them to camps in France, where thousands fleeing from many countries were interned under inhumane conditions. AFSC workers tried to help internees leave the camps and obtain visas to the United States and other countries. It is estimated that the organization assisted some 50,000 refugees in France (Bacon 1999, p. 212).

French Quakers continued the sanctuary tradition, risking their freedom or their lives by hiding Jews and others, whom the Vichy regime had interned or designated as “undesirables,” sometimes for extended periods.

British Quakers took leading roles in rescuing persecuted people in Europe during the 1930s and 40s. Bertha Bracey, secretary of the British Friends Committee on Refugees, lobbied the government to allow 10,000 Jewish children from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia to enter Britain in the Kindertransport of 1938–1939. She supervised 80 caseworkers and volunteers to help coordinate the effort. In 1945 she persuaded the government to transport 300 child survivors of the Holocaust to Britain in 10 RAF bombers. Later the government named her a Hero of the Holocaust.

Kindertransport survivor Ruth David collected stories from about 50 other survivors whom Quakers had assisted in Germany and England. One reported that the Northampton (UK) Society of Friends had helped her find foster parents and paid the bond that allowed her to enter the country. British Quakers also enrolled survivors in Friends’ schools and colleges and paid their fees. Another recounted that her mother had jumped on the last Kindertransport train out of Vienna in 1939. “Without the Quakers, my mother would not have made it to England,” she said (David 2003). After the war British Quakers reunited a survivor with her parents, who had fled to Venezuela. She was luckier than the vast majority of the *kinder*, who never saw their parents again.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Scattergood Friends School in West Branch, Iowa, took in 185 European Jewish refugees from 1939 to 1943, at the suggestion of the AFSC. Local people helped the newly arrived refugees settle in, learn English, grow and prepare food, and maintain the school’s farm during stays of several months. At that time European refugees had great difficulty gaining entry to the US or receiving any assistance from the government if they did manage to arrive. Scattergood’s help shows how Quakers provided sanctuary outside (but not against) the law.

In 1944 the AFSC, the War Refugee Board, the Unitarian Service Committee, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee pressured the U.S. government to admit 1000 refugees from Yugoslavia, Austria, Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. President Roosevelt eventually allowed them in, despite opposition from Congress and the State Department, but they had to sign a statement that they would return to Europe after the war. Many of those refugees spent a year behind barbed wire, in an internment camp at Fort Oswego, New York. They were later allowed to remain in the United States.

Quakers were not unique in their sanctuary efforts, but they often led the way. In 1947 the AFSC and the UK Friends Service Council received the Nobel Peace Prize for their relief work before, during, and after World War II.

The AFSC continued its relief work with 250,000 Arabs in Palestine in 1948. During the Cold War, AFSC sent relief teams to South Korea (1953), Yugoslavia (with Hungarian refugees in 1956), Hong Kong (with Chinese refugees in 1959), and Southeast Asia (with Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian refugees in the 1960s).

In accordance with the Peace Testimony, many American Quakers opposed the Vietnam War. The AFSC counseled conscientious objectors, and some Quaker meetings provided physical sanctuary to young men who refused to register for conscription in the 1960s and 70s.

Quakers were among the founders of the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, which opposed U.S. support for murderous dictatorships in Central America and offered physical sanctuary to Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Guatemalans denied asylum by the U.S. government. Friends meetings were among more than 400 congregations that participated in the Sanctuary Movement at its height in the mid to

late 1980s. A list published in August 1985 included 39 Quaker “sanctuary meetings,” from Adelphi, Maryland, to Iowa City, Iowa, Corpus Christi, Texas, and Eugene, Oregon.

In 1985 Atlanta Monthly Meeting issued a statement comparing their offer of physical sanctuary to earlier Quaker sanctuary initiatives.

From our own beginnings when we were imprisoned for meeting for worship in 17th century England, to helping black people escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad, to attempting to secure safety for Jews fleeing Nazism, we have been led to take an unpopular position even in the face of imprisonment or other government action. . . . In this case the U.S. government is telling us whose life to save and whose life to sacrifice. We understand that deporting refugees back to Central America often means their torture and death. And to us this is a great evil. Our help will serve as a witness as we carry on our Testimony to the deepest part of our Faith. . . . (Ferguson and Rinard 1999, p. 169)

The Sanctuary Movement owed much to the activism and theological writings of one of its founders, Jim Corbett (1933–2001), a Quaker rancher in southern Arizona. Corbett, whom a Friends’ publication called a “spiritual warrior and Quaker prophet,” began helping Central Americans flee persecution in 1981 and participated in the press conference that launched the Sanctuary Movement in Tucson, Arizona, on 24 March 1982 (Buck 2013). Corbett and his collaborators assisted Central Americans to cross the U.S. border and find temporary refuge in houses of worship, universities, homes, and other places, while a Chicago- and Washington, D.C.-based movement waged public campaigns against U.S. intervention in Central America.

Corbett developed the concept of “civil initiative” as the basis of community sanctuary activity:

The defense of human rights by the sanctuary church is faith-based and worship-initiated, but we need look neither to Heaven nor to the Bible nor to corporate conscience for the higher law that overrules unjust laws. . . . [O]ur country was founded on the premise that a society’s constituent individuals and communities retain primary responsibility for protecting human rights. This is a responsibility we may entrust but never forfeit to the state. . . . [M]uch that has been labeled “civil disobedience” is more accurately civil initiative: it is individuals’ or communities’ exercise of their legally established duty to protect the victims of government officials’ violations of fundamental rights. . . .

Civil initiative . . . is peacemaking in its quintessential form. (Corbett 1986b, pp. 17–18)

Corbett and his collaborators, who included Catholic priests, nuns, and a Presbyterian pastor, announced that they were violating sections of the U.S. Code when they launched the movement; but they made it clear that they believed they were answering to a higher law.

Corbett wrote: “For those of us who would be faithful in our allegiance to the Peaceable Kingdom, there’s also no way to avoid recognizing that in his case collaboration with the U.S. government is a betrayal of our faith. . . . Where oppression rules, the way of peace is necessarily insurgent” (quoted in Berryman 1983, p. 6).

Corbett and other leaders operated freely and openly for a couple of years. Eventually, however, the Reagan administration decided to make an example of them by prosecuting 13 leaders, including Corbett, in 1985. During a tumultuous trial the judge forbade the defendants from explaining their reasons for committing the federal felonies of “harboring” and “smuggling” aliens. The jury found 10 of the 13 guilty. Corbett was not convicted, allegedly because nobody would testify against him. The judge decided not to make martyrs of the defendants and sentenced them to probation, on condition that they pledge to cease and desist from their illegal activities. The leaders refused to sign such a statement, and the judge withdrew his demand. They continued their sanctuary efforts; the movement grew. A “Sanctuary Celebration: From Captivity to Covenant,” held in a Washington, D.C., church soon after the trial, attracted about a thousand people.

The Sanctuary Movement reached its peak in 1987–1988. After that time the incoming George H.W. Bush administration changed U.S. policy toward Central America, instituted Temporary Protected Status for Salvadoran and other migrants, and made it somewhat easier for them to obtain asylum. In the 1990s the movement faded from view but never ended. The New Sanctuary Movement emerged around 2006, after comprehensive immigration reform failed in Congress, but a couple of years later its website was empty and the domain name was for sale.

Meanwhile the Quaker sanctuary tradition continued far from Britain and the United States. Kenyan Quakers offered aid and refuge to Rwandan and Burundian refugees during the genocide of 1994. When civil conflict broke out in Kenya in 2007–2008, Friends gave refuge to Kikuyu and Luo people, “with the awareness that the result might be for other neighbors to burn Friends’ homes or churches” (Angell and Dandelion 2013, p. 562).

During the Obama administration (2008–2016) the U.S. government deported an unprecedented number of undocumented migrants. Reaction was muted, except among immigrant rights advocates, who shifted and widened their focus as they realized that all migrants had the same human rights. For them, categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” could no longer be justified. In this way the Quaker Testimony of equality seemed to be permeating the public sphere.

In 2014 a few interfaith coalitions around the USA began announcing that they would offer physical sanctuary to undocumented people at risk of deportation. The New Sanctuary Movement was reborn. With the 2016 election of Donald Trump, who campaigned on an anti-immigrant platform, migrants’ advocates were galvanized into action. Quakers joined other denominations in forming networks, lobbying Congress and state legislatures (through the Friends Committee on National Legislation), and carrying out a variety of sanctuary activities. For example, the Sanctuary Congregation Network of the National Capital Area formed in early 2016; by late 2017, more than 60 congregations from 17 faith traditions, including seven Quaker meetings, were involved.

Church World Service (CWS) estimated that some 800 congregations around the country were participating in the New Sanctuary Movement as of late 2017 (Andersen 2018). Only 21 Quaker meetings were on the CWS list. Nevertheless, Quakers privately offered physical sanctuary or other support to migrants. Their activities included sponsoring Know Your Rights presentations, accompanying migrants to immigration court hearings and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) check-ins, monitoring ICE raids in their communities, assisting migrants’ families, teaching English and other subjects to migrants, donating funds to legal defense and advocacy groups, and helping refugees resettle.

Many Quaker meetings seemed to be conducting lengthy “discernment” processes before deciding if or how to be involved in the New Sanctuary Movement. Quaker meetings are not renowned for making quick decisions. But individual Quakers have seemed ready to shelter sojourners in their midst with little or no advance notice, often at some risk.

Quakers in the UK, France, and other countries are currently involved in sanctuary initiatives. For example, British and European Friends travel regularly to Calais, Dunkirk, and other French cities where asylum seekers and other migrants are camping under difficult conditions. They deliver humanitarian supplies, conduct workshops, prepare meals, and provide other services to homeless,

destitute migrants. Some Quakers assist newly-arrived migrants in Greece and Italy; others offer temporary shelter in their homes. Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN) members participate in Cities of Sanctuary around the UK and collaborate with other groups that help migrants.

### 3. Conclusions

When Quakers offer sanctuary, they see it as a righteous, even if illegal, act: they believe they are called to follow a higher law. To understand the practice of sanctuary in modern society, it is necessary to take into account its sacred character as an act of conscience in many religious traditions. However, that is precisely what secular authorities deny when they declare sanctuary to be criminal or illegitimate. This clash between sacred and secular authority has made sanctuary a powerful and dangerous challenge to repressive law and order. From the seventeenth century until today, Quakers and others have enacted this conflict again and again. Over time, sanctuary and the law have run on parallel, diverging, or colliding tracks. Meanwhile Quakers follow the path they have taken since the beginning, led by their Testimonies, conscience, and the light within.

### 4. Methodological Note

Research for this article included participant observation and interviews during fieldwork in the United States, Britain, and France. From 2014 to 2017 the author visited 25 Friends meetings in those countries and interviewed Quakers who had participated in sanctuary initiatives, in person, by phone, and by email. Some meetings provided paper or digitized archival materials, which the author cited or quoted. The author also attended Friends meetings for worship, business meetings, committee meetings, public demonstrations, and other events as a participant-observer. Primary and secondary research materials included memoirs, letters, articles, pamphlets, and ephemera kept at the Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Friends Historical Library, Friends House (London) library, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Library.

An applied anthropologist, the author is also a human rights activist and public speaker who has participated in numerous events, given dozens of talks to diverse groups, and assisted asylum seekers and refugees in the United States and Britain for more than 20 years. She worked as a project coordinator for a refugee resettlement agency and a volunteer for immigrant advocacy organizations. Two of her eight books recount the social history of sanctuary and asylum. Several of her publications concern professional recertification for refugee professionals in the United States and other countries.

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