

Queries on Our Response to Terrorism

[This letter of introduction was sent along with the queries to all churches and other worship groups (across religious and denominational lines) in Visalia and nearby communities. We were heartened to receive direct and indirect feedback that these queries have been used as the basis of discussion in a number of the groups that were contacted.]

Dear friends:

We of the Visalia Friends Meeting (Quakers) send our greetings to you and your religious community because we believe we share a spiritual bond that transcends religious labels. We as a nation have been confronted with a crisis that is as much spiritual as political. If religious teachings are to be more than a collection of pious platitudes they must apply when the terror is real and emotions run high. At times like these we need to draw together with our neighbors, to pause and reflect on our core values, and to strive for alignment between our beliefs and our actions.

We have met together in worship to reflect on these horrific acts and our individual and national responses to them. Out of that meeting has emerged a list of queries, a traditional Quaker form of sharing. It is the tradition of the Religious Society of Friends not to preach, but rather to call each other to look within and encounter for ourselves God who dwells within. Queries are a means to that end. The issues confronted here are so central to our life as a nation that it was felt that these queries should be shared with the wider community of faith as well. We offer them to you not in the spirit of argument or debate, but as a stimulus for reflection and dialogue. We hope that through them your faith community will join with us in dialogue and a mutual deepening of our respective faiths. We welcome your response.

Yours in the Light,

Visalia Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends

Greg Seastrom, Clerk

Q: How can we as a nation respond to violence and oppression without becoming violent and oppressive?

Q: How can we learn to live at peace with the world when we are, and always will be, vulnerable to terrorism?

Q: Do I really believe we should love our enemies and respond to evil with good? Do these teachings apply even when the injury is great? Do they apply now? Do they apply even if the violence escalates?

Q: Am I careful to make clear distinctions in my thinking and my speech to avoid needless escalation of the violence? Do I distinguish between crimes by individuals and acts of war by nations? Do I distinguish between the inhabitants of a country and the government that rules over them and possibly oppresses them?

Q: When I consider the costs of war, do I take into consideration the human cost on both sides of the conflict, or only the cost of American lives? Do I include among the costs the loss of life and livelihood due to the resultant hunger, deprivation, disease, and economic destruction as well as the direct loss of life in combat?

Q: To what extent is support of my country right and proper? Are there limits to that support? Do I acknowledge that my country, as any country, is a human institution capable of using its power for either good or evil? Do I expect my country to respect the rights of other nations and to work for world peace in cooperation with the United Nations, the World Court, and other institutions promoting international law?

Q: Am I willing to refrain from retribution to break the cycle of violence, where each new incident becomes the justification for an act of revenge?

Q: Have I sought to understand the roots of fear and hatred of the United States expressed in many parts of the world? Do I try to see my country and its actions through the eyes of those who are most critical of us? Where those criticisms may be valid, am I willing to commit myself to work for change?

Q: When someone mentions "terrorists" do I automatically think of a particular ethnic or religious group? Do I allow the actions of extremists to color my attitude toward entire ethnic or religious groups? How can I show compassion for people from other backgrounds living in my community who are themselves terrorized by the backlash to recent events?