

Quaker Faith and Practice at FCNL

Alicia McBride



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Alicia McBride, June 2026

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FCNL’s office in Washington, DC. Photo by Wesley Pinkham/FCNL.

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See www.quaker.org/glossary for definitions of common Quaker terms and phrases.

“[Quaker worship] is
as simple as flying a jet:
you take off,
you go somewhere,
you land;
you quiet yourself,
you encounter God,
you refresh and perhaps
redirect your life.”

— Michael Birkel,
*Silence and Witness:
The Quaker Tradition*
(New York: Orbis, 2004)

The Core of Quaker Faith and Practice

The faith and practice of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) are closely intertwined. The central tenet—what Margery Post Abbott and Carl Abbott call the “durable theological core” of Quakers¹—is a belief that the Divine is directly accessible to everyone.² Quaker practices and worship are focused on enabling an experience of that divine presence.

Friends expect these encounters with the Divine to result in action. George Fox, a founder of the Religious Society of Friends, enjoined Friends to “walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.”³ The outward actions that Friends discern from what God reveals are known as testimonies and commonly include the pursuit of peace, simplicity, integrity, and equity.⁴

Quakers may encounter God as individuals, but communal discernment plays a critical role in recognizing and refining how Friends are led. By testing a leading in community, Friends can distinguish between what is a nudge from God and what has its origins in ego or obligation.

¹ Margery Post Abbott and Carl Abbott, *Quakerism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

² Friends use many words to describe this presence, based on their beliefs and preferences. These words might include God, the Inner Christ, the Divine, Spirit, teacher, the good, love, or Inner Wisdom. In this pamphlet I use language that speaks to my experience as a Quaker. I encourage you to translate these terms into language that connects with you as you read.

³ This statement comes from a 1656 letter from George Fox, written to Quaker ministers while imprisoned in England.

⁴ For more on Quaker testimonies, see Paul Buckley, *Quaker Testimony: What We Witness to the World* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #481, 2023)

Friends are called not only to let our lives speak, but to let them preach.⁵ There is no creed or catechism that Quakers must agree to as part of our faith. Friends' faithfulness is seen through the evidence of our actions—both large and small. The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) brings the leadings of Friends to Congress and the administration. Through its advocacy, FCNL seeks to shape U.S. government action in ways that reflect the guidance of Spirit. From its lobbying approach to the policies it pursues, FCNL is part of the ongoing work of Friends to demonstrate their faith in the wider world.

Context Matters

While this theological core may be durable and consistent, the expressions of faith have shifted along with the social and cultural contexts in which Friends have found themselves. This is part of our movement's strength: Quakers hold the possibility of ongoing divine direction, allowing for creative responses to new circumstances. Friends refer to this possibility as "continuing revelation." We can recognize the divine impulse at work among Friends across time, culture, and geography. We can also observe how the context in which different Friends live shapes their faith and practice.

The desire to seek and follow God's guidance does not confer infallibility. Friends may sometimes be prophets, but we are not saints. Friends' experience of the Divine is filtered through our

⁵ In a 1661 epistle, George Fox wrote, "So let your lives preach, let your light shine, that your works may be seen, that your Father may be glorified; that your fruits may be unto holiness, and that your end may be everlasting life... and they who do so come to answer that which God requires, 'to love mercy, do justly, and to walk humbly with God.' And this is more than all the talkers of justice, righteousness, and holiness, whose life denies what their tongues profess and talk of."

own experience, prejudices, and expectations, as well as through those of our community. We need to pair our commitment to divine listening with a commitment to humility.

How is FCNL's work part of Quaker faith and Quaker practice? How does the context in which FCNL operates—in Washington, DC, as a U.S. nonprofit and lobbying organization, in the 21st century—influence its particular manifestation of this faith and practice in the world? These are the questions I will explore here, focusing on four areas: governance, decision-making and leadership, lobbying, and community and culture.

In nearly 25 years of work with FCNL, I have experienced how connection to Spirit coexists with a creative commitment to influence laws and policies to build a better future.

Early Friends dismissed that which was not Quaker as being “of the world.”⁶ By sharing my perspective, I hope to *celebrate* the intersection of Quaker faith and the world and to spark new conversations about what is possible when we pair deep listening for divine guidance with a commitment to act.

The desire to seek and follow God's guidance does not confer infallibility. Friends may sometimes be prophets, but we are not saints.

⁶ Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).



Staff offer a report to the General Committee, the body that governs FCNL. Photo by Eric Bond/FCNL.

Governance

As a U.S. nonprofit, FCNL and its sibling organizations (the FCNL Education Fund and Friends Place on Capitol Hill) operate from a set of bylaws that lays out its governance. The bylaws define how FCNL, the nonprofit entity, maps onto FCNL, the Quaker organization. For example, the bylaws name the General Committee as “the policy-making body of the Corporation... which may exercise all the powers and authority granted to the Corporation by law.”⁷ Having defined FCNL’s board of directors, the bylaws also stipulate that General Committee members must be closely tied to Quaker community and will make decisions “in the manner of Friends without voting.”⁸

In its bylaws, FCNL seeks both to make itself understandable to the legal system it operates within and to define itself so it can faithfully act as a Quaker organization.

⁷ FCNL Bylaws, 2024, Article II.1

⁸ Ibid, Article III.4

Who Can Be Part of FCNL Governance

Friends' commitment to divine listening and action is evident in the evolution of FCNL governance. We can see this in recent changes to the requirements for General Committee service, and in ongoing conversation and discernment about who FCNL is responsible to.

Relation to Quaker Membership

Prior to 2019, General Committee members had to be formal members of a Quaker community. This requirement was intended to ensure that General Committee members had experience with Quaker practice and decision-making and were committed to advancing Quaker faith in action.

However, over many years concerns rose that this condition excluded the full range of voices in our community, and that FCNL's General Committee needed more flexibility. Among those restricted from service were those Friends, often younger people, who were not settled in a single location long enough to join a meeting.

For some people, action through a Quaker organization like FCNL, or participation in a community like a Yearly Meeting camping or youth program, might be their strongest connection to Quaker faith and practice.

FCNL, like other Quaker organizations, operates in a creative tension without definitive, correct answers. Being true to its mission and identity means being open to ongoing discernment amid ambiguity.

This restriction also failed to account for the theological or cultural reasons that might prevent someone from joining their local Quaker meeting or church.

The General Committee discerned a need for change. A working group listened to Friends and others in the FCNL community, asked questions, and tested ideas. In 2019, the governors came to unity on revising the bylaws as follows:

“All members of the General Committee must be members of the Religious Society of Friends or otherwise demonstrate a history of connection with and commitment to the Religious Society of Friends.”⁹

This change addresses the specific circumstances named above. It also prompts deeper consideration about what makes FCNL governance distinctly Quaker and what expectations are placed on governors. Ensuring that all General Committee members are prepared to make decisions in the manner of Friends requires attention to mentorship and training that goes beyond typical board development.

FCNL, like other Quaker organizations, operates in a creative tension in which there are frequently no definitive, correct answers. Being true to its mission and identity means being open to ongoing discernment amid ambiguity.

The conversation around these most recent bylaws changes brings up a number of queries for ongoing consideration. Who is FCNL responsible to? What does it look like to remain open to divine guidance? How do we pay attention to voices and leadings that may not originate in the Quaker community? These queries invite us into deeper discernment about how faith and practice come together in FCNL’s work.

⁹ Ibid, Article II, 2. Emphasis added.

Relation to Citizenship

A year later, the General Committee made another change in FCNL's bylaws, this one related to citizenship. The specific considerations were different, but the sense of continuing revelation and the call of our faith carries through.

A citizenship requirement for board members of a U.S. nonprofit is a common practice, although it is not a requirement to receive tax exempt status.¹⁰ The line in FCNL's bylaws, requiring that "all members of the General Committee must be citizens of the United States," carried through even as other parts of the bylaws were revised.¹¹

At a time of growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, however, the line was more directly called into question. Perspectives differed among Friends on the General Committee, but also the sense of the group became clear: the citizenship requirement was out of alignment with how Friends, through FCNL, were led to act in the world.

Beginning with the Quaker belief that each person has access to God, FCNL's lobbying on migration demonstrates the need to encounter each other with love and compassion, regardless of citizenship or place of birth. Putting this belief into action, FCNL emphasizes actions in solidarity with migrant communities.

The sense of the group became clear: The citizenship requirement was out of alignment with how Friends, through FCNL, were led to act in the world.

¹⁰ See www.se4nonprofits.com/blog/qa-115-are-nonprofit-board-members-required-to-be-us-residents

¹¹ FCNL Bylaws, 2019, Article II, 2.

We are called to act in ways that recognize each person's humanity and dignity, regardless of where they come from. This lobbying has arisen from the concerns of Friends involved in governance and in meetings and churches around the country.

At Annual Meeting 2019, the citizenship requirement was identified as a challenge to FCNL acting with integrity on migration justice. At Annual Meeting 2020, it was eliminated.

The conversation around citizenship is just one example of the discernment FCNL undertakes as it forges a path of integrous action in the world. FCNL has embedded itself in a set of laws and norms—around tax status, lobbying, employment practices, and more—in order to influence them. Sometimes, that social container is flexible enough to contain FCNL's Quaker practices. But these laws and norms may not always align with Friends' testimonies or witness. FCNL remains aware of these tensions and must weigh the call of faith and the potential consequences of following that call.

This process of consideration and listening is at the heart of FCNL's Quaker identity. FCNL is a Quaker organization in the ways that it listens to the promptings of Spirit. It can act with great clarity out of that faith. It also recognizes the trust others have put in it in how it carries out that work and endeavors to faithfully steward that trust.

FCNL Policy Positions and Legislative Priorities

Some of the most important governance decisions of the General Committee involve the policy positions that FCNL takes and what the organization focuses on for active lobbying. The process through which FCNL policy and legislative priorities are set illustrates FCNL's grounding in Quaker faith and a commitment to listening for truth in community.

Friends are asked to listen deeply to the movement of Spirit and to transcend personal preference to sense collective truth. This listening takes place at different stages, from meeting and church gatherings to consider where Friends are led, to the Policy Committee's weighing of these responses, to consideration by General Committee.¹²

The process begins by inviting Friends' meetings, churches, and other communities to gather in worship, with attention to queries such as the following, shared by the Policy Committee in 2026:

- » How are Friends called to influence our government today?
- » What issues should be the priority for our advocacy efforts?
- » Where is Spirit leading us?

The Policy Committee encourages Friends to welcome wide participation in this reflection. Some meetings invite young Friends or First Day School participants to do their own discernment, to be shared with FCNL alongside that of the meeting as a whole. Meetings and churches carry out their discernment in a way that works for their circumstances, norms, and ways of gathering.

Friends are asked to listen deeply to the movement of Spirit and to transcend personal preference to sense collective truth.

¹² See www.fcnl.org/priorities for more details about the priorities-setting process.

As FCNL has named more explicitly its commitment to AJEDI (anti-racism, anti-bias, justice, equity, diversity, and integrity), it has also sought more awareness of whose perspectives are reflected in this discernment.¹³

Beginning in 2024, responding to feedback from Friends of color, FCNL began asking groups to share how their own experiences and backgrounds intersect with the priorities they are recommending. These responses both give the Policy Committee context about what is shared and identify people and communities whose advocacy on an issue might be especially powerful. This does not discount groups who come to a concern out of faith or indirect involvement, but it recognizes that those most affected by a policy have insights and wisdom that need to be heard.

Even with this additional awareness, the policy and priorities setting process raises questions. While the Friends communities that participate with FCNL include people from a range of backgrounds, they are not as diverse as the whole country.

A key insight of the Friends' movement has been that access to divine wisdom is not dependent on race, class, education, social status, or any other human marker of authority. At the same time, we recognize that our identities and upbringing affect our capacity to hear and interpret what God may be speaking. Even Quakers can experience group-think and fall into unconscious patterns and assumptions. When a wider group of people is listening, a fuller picture of divine guidance can be perceived.¹⁴

¹³ See www.fcnl.org/ajedi for a fuller statement of FCNL's commitments.

¹⁴ A Hindu parable tells of a group of blind men who encounter an elephant. Each man believes the elephant to be a different kind of creature, depending on whether he touches its ear, its tusk, its side, or its trunk. They can only assemble a picture of the elephant in its entirety if they share and combine their perspectives. For Friends, Divine truth is our elephant, and different angles from which each of us encounters it are all necessary to have a fuller understanding of the whole.

FCNL's policy process is about discerning where Spirit is leading and how Friends are called to act. Seeking answers to those queries means listening deeply to Friends and Friends' communities, as FCNL has done for more than 80 years. It also requires recognizing and incorporating the pieces of truth the majority of U.S. Friends may not hear as clearly.

Over the past several years, the Policy Committee has more intentionally sought out people, Quaker and otherwise, with a range of perspectives, identities, and life experiences related to FCNL policy issues.

Once the Policy Committee has done its initial discernment on policy directions, based on what is shared by Quaker communities around the country, it invites a wider group to weigh in and offer their insights. This group might include FCNL staff, colleague organizations, and people whose background provides direct experience with the policies FCNL lobbies on.

This consultation adds depth to the range of perspectives that might be reflected in the discernment of individual Friends' meetings and churches. The ultimate decision on policy and priorities rests with the General Committee, meeting in the manner of Friends.

This adaptation offers a way to incorporate perspectives we may not hear as frequently or loudly in Friends' spaces while still centering initial discernment and final decision-making

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in Friends' worshipping communities. It recognizes the realities of who is present, and whose voices hold most weight, in the majority of U.S. Quaker communities today, as well as the concerns and values that those Quaker communities ask FCNL to represent. It endeavors to ensure that those most affected by the policies FCNL lobbies on, and with the most experience of how those policies function, are part of the conversation, even when those people are not part of our meetings or churches.

This shift is an example of FCNL questioning the status quo of its own processes as it gains new understanding and seeks greater integrity. This questioning needs to continue as Friends communities and the context of FCNL's work continues to change.

For example, what about the discernment that takes place in meetings and churches makes it Quaker? How much depends on the religious identity of the people in the room, and how much on the process itself? Could people learn and participate in this process outside of a Quaker community? Would inviting a wider group of people into the initial discernment lead FCNL to be less, or more, responsive to the promptings of Spirit and the concerns of Friends?

These questions are especially important as FCNL pursues the goals of its strategic plan.¹⁵ The plan directs FCNL to "transform its grassroots advocacy network into a powerful, diverse, strategic, and intergenerational movement" in service of the organization's policy goals. As FCNL endeavors to integrate its AJEDI commitments throughout its work, a key strategy is to "cultivate authentic relationships with communities that are impacted by government policies and act in solidarity to meet their urgent needs." These goals are an invitation and opportunity for ongoing learning, discernment, and growth.

¹⁵ "Towards the World We Seek: FCNL 2024–2028 Strategic Plan," www.fcnl.org/strategicplan

Leadership Structures and Decision-Making

Leadership structures and decision-making practices are another place where FCNL seeks to be both faithful and effective. Broadly, these structures are meant to facilitate FCNL’s ability to influence federal policy in the direction that Spirit is leading. They recognize the power that comes from decisions based in deep spiritual grounding and unity, and a need for nimbleness to allow FCNL to interact effectively in the political realm.

The Relationship between Governors and Staff

The General Committee follows a similar decision-making process to a monthly or yearly meeting. The way that governance-level decisions are made is spelled out in FCNL’s bylaws:

“In the deliberations of the Corporation [FCNL] and its committees...the presiding clerk gathers the sense of the meeting under the leading of the Spirit and presents a minute reflecting that sense of the meeting to the committee for its approval.”¹⁶

With broad organizational direction set in this manner, FCNL’s mission of exerting influence on the secular world of the U.S. government also requires flexibility.

FCNL is able to question the status quo of its own processes as it gains new understanding and seeks greater integrity.

¹⁶ FCNL Bylaws, 2024, Article III.4

A Quaker meeting or church body might entrust authority to a committee or individual to act on behalf of the community. Similarly, the General Committee, and the Executive Committee acting on its behalf, empowers FCNL leadership and staff to act within the framework of policies established through deep listening, discernment, and worship.

Decisions around lobbying strategy are an example of this relationship. In a 2024 memo to the General Committee outlining the process of setting FCNL's legislative priorities, the Policy Committee states:

“The legislative priorities should not outsource discernment to staff, but FCNL staff are entrusted to allocate and prioritize resources among the priorities based on staff capacity, congressional opportunities, FCNL's [added value], and expertise.”¹⁷

While they each have their own areas of responsibility, staff and governors participate alike in FCNL's faith as well as its practice. In their advocacy and engagement, staff represent Friends' belief in the Divine accessible to each person.

Staff and leadership also engage in their own discernment about organizational direction in the unpredictable environment of Capitol Hill.

Part of the governors' role, meanwhile, is to experience FCNL's expression of Quaker faith through lobbying, events, and more. The intertwining of Quaker faith and practice at FCNL requires trust between staff and governors. Staff need to trust the governors' understanding of FCNL's mission and their leadings to set organizational direction to advance that mission.

¹⁷ “FCNL Legislative Priorities for the 119th Congress: Discernment Process,” shared with the General Committee November 2024. Available upon request to FCNL.

Governors need to trust staff knowledge and judgment about how to carry out those leadings in federal politics. Regular interactions and education from both groups on the others' area of responsibility are key.

Staff Leadership Structures

On the surface, FCNL's internal structure resembles many other nonprofits. The head of the organization is hired by and responsible to a board. A leadership team is responsible for organizational policies, finances, and managing risk. Other levels of authority and decision-making are delegated to specific roles.

Yet even the lightest of scratches beneath this structure's surface shows its Quaker sensibility. The conventions of FCNL leadership titles arise out of its Quaker identity. Instead of an executive director, chief of staff, and set of vice presidents, FCNL has a general secretary; deputy general secretary; and associate general secretaries for advancement, finance, and policy and advocacy. These titles are ongoing reminders that leadership at FCNL is also about listening, recording, and serving. This pattern of titles is common across many Quaker organizations and yearly meetings.



Staff gather to celebrate advocacy and community at the first ever Friends Changemaker Weekend in April 2026. Photo by DAG Photo/FCNL.

FCNL's leadership approaches likewise stem from core beliefs of the Quaker faith: that wisdom can come from a range of sources, and that a more elevated title does not confer greater access to truth. Out of a desire to recognize these elements of FCNL's culture, FCNL's organizational chart was recast from a hierarchical pyramid to a wheel, with leadership at the center rather than the top.

This Quaker-infused approach to leadership empowers decision-making at a multitude of levels, grants authority to cross-team working groups, and heavily emphasizes input and consultation. Staff consistently identify the consultative nature of FCNL's work as a strength to be preserved.

To fulfill its mission and be effective in the political arena, FCNL also needs to be able to be responsive and take decisive action. Quaker processes have the reputation of being slow and even ponderous. Friends are offering some important challenges to the assumption that Spirit can only move at a slow, deliberate pace, which FCNL and other Quaker bodies need to consider.¹⁸ FCNL has the ability to draw on the roles of organizational hierarchy when needed and to consider how to creatively act from the core tenets of Friends while also fulfilling the trust placed in it to have an impact on federal policy decisions.

The clerking and sense-of-the-group structure used in FCNL's Executive Leadership and Senior Leadership Team meetings is one way that the organization forges a path between these norms.¹⁹

These are not meetings for worship, and staff may not understand their participation in religious terms. Yet the underlying intent of the group, to coalesce around a shared sense of direction, and to have a

¹⁸ See, for example, Kat Griffith, "Careful Discernment or Spiritual Timidity?" *Friends Journal*, October 2020, www.friendsjournal.org/careful-discernment-or-spiritual-timidity and the section on inattention to right relationship with time in *Pendle Hill Pamphlet #495, Patterns of Racial Wounding and Racial Justice in Quaker Communities*, by Lauren Brownlee and Zenaida Peterson.

clerk listening to name that decision, draws on Quaker business process.²⁰

Recognizing that it is not always possible for the group to share a sense of direction in the time available, FCNL also names decision-makers and next steps if the group cannot unite.

In drawing both on Quaker processes and nonprofit practices, trust and communication are key. Many organizations strive for a balance of participation and responsiveness, but that balance takes on added weight when the beliefs and conventions of a faith tradition spark specific expectations.

At FCNL, I have observed and experienced these challenges especially when it seems that the demands of Quaker decision-making and nonprofit management pull decision-makers in different directions.

Many organizations strive for a balance of participation and responsiveness, but that balance takes on added weight when the beliefs and conventions of a faith tradition spark specific expectations.

¹⁹ "Sense of the group" is used deliberately here, rather than consensus, which is a related but distinct mode of decision-making. In *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting*, Barry Morley draws this distinction: "Consensus is achieved through a process of reasoning in which reasonable people search for a satisfactory decision. But in seeking the sense of the meeting, we open ourselves to being guided... to a place where we sit in unity to the collective inward Presence. Through consensus, we decide it; through sense of the meeting, we turn it over, allowing it to be decided" (p. 5). He goes on to quote another Friend: "Reaching consensus is a secular process. In sense of the meeting God gets a voice." (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #307, 1993)

²⁰ FCNL has found *The Atheist's Guide to Quaker Process: Spirit-Led Decisions for the Secular* by Selden Smith, to be a useful resource in framing the goals of these gatherings while honoring the religious diversity of those participating. (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #472, 2021)

For example, this is felt around personnel decisions. The legal constraints of what can be shared at times conflict with a desire for care and transparency among staff at large.

I have confidence that those making personnel decisions are striving to act consistently with organizational values and Quaker principles, but the level of direct knowledge I have of those processes is understandably limited. This can feel jarring when so many other decisions are discussed widely. It is important that decision-makers set expectations for how they are making particular kinds of decisions and why.

FCNL is not unique among organizations in experiencing challenges and lack of clarity around internal decision-making, although norms around Quaker decision-making provide a particular lens for these challenges. FCNL's internal leadership processes continue to evolve to honor both its Quaker and nonprofit lineages. FCNL seeks to demonstrate how Quaker values can be brought to bear on national policy in a faithful and effective way.

Lobbying

FCNL does not speak for all Friends in the United States, and yet its positions have the weight of moral authority coming from the discernment and agreement of Friends across the country. Its approach to lobbying, like its decision-making and leadership, is built on Quaker faith and practice and adapted for the context in which it operates.

Lobbying can invite an oppositional, results-driven frame of mind. One "side" is asking another "side" to do something, with both parties participating in a ritualized exchange governed by scarcity (of time, attention, resources, and the will of elected leaders). To influence those leaders, FCNL chooses to participate in this space, accepting some of the norms and subverting others.

FCNL infuses lobbying with the faith and practice of Friends. Whether or not a person participating in a lobby visit identifies as a Quaker, if they are trained and supported by FCNL, they are taking part in FCNL's particularly Quaker approach to persuasion.

As with Quaker faith and practice overall, this approach begins from the belief that the Divine is directly accessible to everyone—including decision-makers, their staff, and the lobbyists themselves. While people can hold ideas that are wrong, misguided, or dangerous, people themselves are not irredeemable or evil.

We can always speak to the Divine within them. As Margery Post Abbott writes, "Friends at FCNL are led to believe that the Quaker activist is respectful of those who govern and, therefore, engages members of Congress as individuals who wish to govern well. FCNL seeks to hear from members of Congress and learn from them as well as inform them of its positions."²¹

FCNL's lobbying endeavors to create a space in which Spirit can move in everyone's heart, leaving open the possibility of transformation. Our preconceived ideas about someone, based on their political party, profession, or other identity, can make us less attentive to those openings.

FCNL's lobbying endeavors to create a space in which Spirit can move in everyone's heart, leaving open the possibility of transformation.

²¹ Margery Post Abbott, *A Theological Perspective on Quaker Lobbying* (FCNL Education Fund, 2020), p. 20.

FCNL is nonpartisan and as an organization is open to talking with everyone.²² FCNL recognizes the complexity and conflicting perspectives within any one person. It is willing both to celebrate when someone has taken a positive step, and to name when they are working in a different direction or causing harm.

FCNL is part of a long tradition of Friends who have felt called to speak with those with whom they disagree and to “labor” with them to share a sense of truth. John Woolman’s 18th century travels among and conversation with Quaker slaveholders is just one example of this work.²³

This approach is integrated into FCNL’s lobbying. FCNL’s roadmap for lobby visits starts with identifying something the office can be thanked for.²⁴ FCNL encourages those engaged in advocacy to find time to center (or pray, or meditate), individually or collectively, in advance of conversations.

It also emphasizes follow-up, seeing each lobby visit as a step in building a trusting ongoing relationship. Through education, training, and support, FCNL seeks to make lobbying accessible to a wide range of people and to encourage people to speak their truth as directly as they can with those most able to make change. This approach to lobbying also asks people to listen deeply and reach for the meaning underneath the words that might be said.

²² FCNL also recognizes that not every individual may feel led, or feel safe, to engage in dialogue with every person. As an organization we may engage, but individuals have agency to decide how they wish to participate.

²³ For more on John Woolman and his relevance to modern Friends, see Michael Birkel, *A New Sympathy: The Timeless Quaker Wisdom of John Woolman* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2010).

²⁴ Available at www.fcnl.org/resources/lobby-visit-roadmap

It does not require affirmation of the other person's point of view, but it does require empathy to be present with them as they share that perspective.

In the highly polarized political environment of Congress, this kind of listening and lobbying is both difficult and uncommon. In its coalition work, FCNL is sometimes able to secure meetings with offices that our partner organizations cannot, due to a perception of the group's partisanship or ideology. FCNL's approach gives it access.

Of course, that access does not mean the office is interested in reciprocating FCNL's openness of approach. Continuing to show up and be willing to talk—even if our worldview and even description of a problem are profoundly different—is itself a radical expression of Quaker faith.

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Culture and Community

FCNL as a Culture

Among its staff, volunteers, and at its events, FCNL aspires to a culture that draws both on its Quaker identity and best practices among nonprofit organizations. Its core values are to radically love, pursue peace, uphold justice, embody stewardship, and act with integrity.²⁵ These values “serve as reminders of the deeper spiritual principles underpinning our legislative priorities and relationship-based approach to changing the world.”²⁶

Building on these values are FCNL’s principles of organizational culture, adopted in 2024: commitment to organizational mission, vision, and values; belonging; trust; balance and wellness; mutual accountability; communication and transparency; flexibility and adaptability; joy, hope, and love; and values-based decision-making.

In creating a culture that recognizes each person’s access to divine wisdom, FCNL also recognizes the effects of the broader culture it operates in. Writing in *Friends Journal* in 2023, Lauren Brownlee and I lay out how attention to Friends’ testimonies can create a counterweight to the broader culture’s norms and biases.²⁶

FCNL is working to build beloved community where people can experience belonging as they work to advance FCNL’s mission, whether they are doing that work as staff or volunteers.

²⁵ See www.fcnl.org/corevalues

²⁶ Lauren Brownlee and Alicia McBride, “Quaker Process at FCNL: Countercultural Leadership for the World We Seek,” *Friends Journal*, June 2023
Accessible at www.friendsjournal.org/quaker-process-at-fcnl

FCNL's AJEDI commitments are an essential component of this culture, one that arises from its Quaker grounding.²⁷ As Lauren Brownlee and Zenaida Peterson observe:

“To know that God lives in all of us is to know that every person we meet is a mirror to the Divine and a mirror to ourselves. Racial liberation work allows us to have integrity in our relationships with ourselves and all the people around us.”²⁸

The culture FCNL creates is not incidental to its mission; rather, that culture sets the pattern for the policies the organization advocates for. Our commitment to uphold principles of anti-racism, anti-bias, justice, equity, diversity, and integrity is critical to creating a culture that aligns with our belief in the inherent dignity and equal worth of each person.

FCNL as Community

FCNL's lobbying priorities arise from Quaker discernment, but the community that works to advance these priorities is larger than just members of Quaker meetings and churches. Anyone who shares the organization's vision and aligns with its approach is welcome and encouraged to participate in events, lobbying, and programs.

The culture FCNL creates is not incidental to its mission; rather, that culture sets the pattern for the policies the organization advocates for.

²⁷ See www.fcnl.org/ajedi

²⁸ Lauren Brownlee and Zenaida Peterson, *Patterns of Racial Wounding and Racial Justice in Quaker Communities* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #495, 2025) p. 1

The policies that FCNL pursues are often what draw people to the FCNL community across a range of experiences, backgrounds, and identities. But the Quaker faith and practice of FCNL are what gives the work richness and depth. The policy work on its own could easily be frantic and disheartening. FCNL's approach connects that work to something larger and more powerful than any one individual's effort.

The first leader of FCNL, E. Raymond Wilson, described the faith that characterizes this approach when he wrote to accept the position in 1943. He 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.”²⁹

Through work with FCNL, some people come to be part of a broader Quaker community as well. That has certainly been my experience. I was a new attendee at Quaker meeting when I accepted a one-year fellowship with FCNL. The people I met, and the ways I saw their faith alive in their work in the world, set me on a path of greater involvement and leadership in the Religious Society of Friends.

I have seen that same pattern repeat with others over the years. Not everyone who joins FCNL will want to become a Quaker, nor is there an expectation that will happen. The invitation is there, however, if people are interested. It can be powerful to experience a system of belief through its effects on the world, and to experience that action in a community of others looking to make change.

²⁹ E. Raymond Wilson, *Uphill for Peace: Quaker Impact on Congress* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975)



FCNL first- and second-year interns gather on a Potomac River cruise during a July 2002 staff summer party and intern goodbye.

It is not only the people who join FCNL's community who are changed by it. The community itself evolves and shifts as people bring their own experience and creativity and questions—Quakers might say their own experience of the Divine—to this work.

Built on the foundation of universal access to God, to love, and to insight, FCNL's community has the capacity to change and become a fuller expression of what Quaker work in the world, today, in this context, can mean.

Conclusion

FCNL's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan summarizes concisely the connection between FCNL's identity as a faith organization and its work: "our mission is not just a statement, but a call to action—a prophetic Quaker witness that we strive to live out daily."³⁰

FCNL's prophetic Quaker witness, and its grounding in Quaker principles and practices, is clear from its governance, its leadership and decision-making structure, its approach to lobbying, and the culture and community it tries to create. At the same time, FCNL is a unique manifestation of what it means to live out Quaker principles and faith in the world.



FCNL's Diaspora Organizers Program is a ten-month-long initiative that trains diaspora advocates to hone their community organizing skills, lobby Congress, and build power. Photo by Tirrea Billings/FCNL.

³⁰ See www.fcnl.org/strategicplan

FCNL functions in a different context than a Quaker meeting or church. It is seeking to do something different than a secular progressive nonprofit, or even a Quaker nonprofit working in another field.

FCNL's Quaker practice involves people who may not identify as Quaker but who nonetheless commit to acting consistently with the beliefs that are central to the organization. And its Quaker practice involves Quakers who come from different branches and forms of worship, but who likewise come together in the expression of their faith that happens through FCNL.

Fulfilling this mission requires a firm grounding in Quaker principles and practices, and a willingness to act from that foundation when times are hard. FCNL's work happens at an often-uncomfortable boundary where Quaker views of the world can collide with the priorities of other philosophies and ways of being.

There is no one, right, pure way to be a Quaker, or to act at this boundary. It is where new, creative, exciting ways of being Quaker in the world can emerge. Everyone who participates with FCNL is part of this act of creation.

FCNL's work happens at an often-uncomfortable boundary where Quaker views of the world can collide with the priorities of other philosophies and ways of being.



Photo by Eric Bond/FCNL.

About the Author

Alicia McBride serves as FCNL's senior director for Quaker leadership. In this role, she works with staff, governors, Quakers, and advocates to connect them to the shared work of effective, prophetic Quaker advocacy. She clerks several staff and leadership teams, organizes FCNL's Annual Meeting, and supports and strengthens FCNL's relationships with Quakers and their meetings and churches across the country.

An alumna of the young adult program, Alicia returned to FCNL professionally in 2004 as the first head of communications. Since then, her work has spanned online and print communications, strategic planning, organizational storytelling, and Quaker engagement. Her different roles are connected by a concern for how to live and act with integrity in a complicated and imperfect world.

Alicia holds an M.S. in Human Centered Design and Engineering from the University of Washington, Seattle, and a B.A. in English from Carleton College. She is a member of Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting, Baltimore Yearly Meeting, and serves on the advisory board for the Earlham School of Religion. She is also a certified yoga teacher and enjoys reading and talking about books, knitting, and cooking. She and her partner have two young adult children and live in Takoma Park, MD.

Queries

The Core of Quaker Faith and Practice

What is the “durable theological core” of Quaker faith and practice, to you?

How has your identity, geography, and culture shaped your practice as a Quaker? Can you imagine another set of circumstances in which your practice might look different?

Governance

How do Quaker institutions best discern to whom they are responsible?

Why and how might Friends faithfully listen to people outside of their community in guiding decisions and actions?

How do you remain “open to ongoing discernment amid ambiguity” (p. 7)? How can this openness be reflected in Quaker institutions?

Leadership and Decision-Making

What qualities are needed to lead in a Quaker institution?

When have you experienced decision-making that is both Spirit-led and responsive to external forces?

Lobbying

How do you approach conversations with others in a way that creates space for mutual transformation?

How is a willingness to show up and talk with people you disagree with an expression of Quaker faith?

Culture and Community

When have you experienced beloved community (characterized by love, peace with justice, and belonging)³⁰?

What is countercultural about Quaker principles and practices?

³⁰ See <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/> for more about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of Beloved Community.



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