

# Ireland Yearly Meeting 2023

## Preparing for Peace

## How can we prepare for peace?

An intervention by Florence Foster, Representative for Peace & Disarmament at the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva on Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023.



*Celebrating 75 Years of  
Quaker Peace and Justice  
Work at the UN*

*We look back and  
ahead: What will we  
accomplish together  
next?*



“ I want to speak to you about preparing for peace through the lens of the Quaker United Nation Office today – starting with our broader methods and approaches, and adding an example from the program I’m leading on [Peace & Disarmament](#), hopefully echoing Iain's points, and reflecting on how they unfold in the policy spheres we interact with.

I hope this will give you a sense of what we do, and that you will find your generous annual donations to us well placed. And of course, that you will continue recommending some of your younger Friends to work with us as we have had a number of Irish friends come through Quaker House Geneva.

Our history and methods are embedded in the hopes of and for peace.

The United Nations system in Geneva and New York as they were being set up were based on the assumption of a common will to prevent the recurrence of the conditions and factors that had brought about horrific suffering and loss of life in the Second World War.

Great hope came with its creation.

A noteworthy feature is that these institutions were conceived as purely inter-State bodies. And Quakers have over time been instrumental in ensuring that the idea of civil society was also present, this becoming a foundational and precursory part of our work today. This continues to be a central tenet of how we believe peace should be prepared for - with and through civil society; a UN with and for ‘us the people’ as enshrined in the UN Charter.

- **Quaker witness in multilateral spaces:  
Being quietly and subversively present to build and prepare for a more peaceful and just world.**

There is a tendency to mystify Quaker multilateral work – partly because of its often off-the-record nature and the policy settings in which it takes place and that shapes it.

It is important to highlight here that our work is, fundamentally, no different from the socially engaged work in which Friends are involved, corporately or individually - Iain has outlined a handful of those already.

It finds its root in the belief that we must value each individual and seek to reach that spark of good, vision, or willingness to risk, that resides in each person.

The quote from Duncan Wood and Penny McMillin particularly speak to this point:

*‘If we believe in the necessity of worldwide institutions to meet the needs of the whole human family, we have a duty to support and encourage those who work for them, whether as delegates of members State or of the secretariat. We have to share with them our conviction that their work, though often dull, bureaucratic and unspectacular, is a worthwhile contribution to the achievement of humanity...Our task is essentially to demonstrate the spiritual dimension of international relations’ - Duncan Wood and Penny McMillin QUNO, 1995-1996.*

This can be found in the diverse ways in which we approach and shape our activities behind the scenes, building trust, reduce conflict and advance the reconciling of difference by bringing together people from a range of backgrounds including diplomats, UN officials, staff of non-governmental organizations, academics, experts and practitioners.

By creating space for ‘small circles and quiet processes’ in Quaker Houses in New York and Geneva we help shape institutions and international priorities, and we bring attention to issues that are not yet on the international agenda. Importantly, the reputation and atmosphere of our Quaker Houses allows for the emergence of more reflective and inclusive responses to difficult issues which might not be heard in more formal settings. The scale of international negotiations can feel challenging, but the trusting environment we provide often around a meal, informed by Quaker methods, remains key to our work and to preparing for peace.

For instance, I have started meetings by grounding the breakfast conversation inviting people to reflect on how small arms may have impacted them or their community or how diplomats relate to the cold war era, their memories of that time – sharing if that was appropriate.

But this also features in our presence and our long-term persistence, in these political public spaces, where we are seen as trusted listeners who operate with integrity and a capacity to engage all sides with little to no institutional axe to grind.

Perhaps a little side note in anticipation of a question in that regard, is that the specific themes we decide to work on seek to represent Friends’ concerns - and in turn we seek to be guided by Friends. However, we do not work on single country issues – in the name of even-handedness, and the choice of themes that we work on within each of our program are tailored by the specific capacities, structures we have access to, style of work and experience that we bring to the table, that no one else can.

As a segway to my second point – let me perhaps note here that while I lead on our formal peace work - our strong social justice lens helps us see the numerous themes we work on as contributors to sustainable peace – namely the ways in which we work on climate change, the rights of migrants, or economic systems is anchored in social justice, and we see both the substance and the methods as pathways for sustainable peace.

➤ **Peace & Disarmament:**

**Example of our work on corporate responsibility, focusing on the arms trade & its impact.**

Importantly, for this conversation on ‘Preparing for Peace’, we understand peace as more than the absence of war and violence, recognizing the need to look for what seeds of war there may be in all our social, political, and economic relationships.

But you may have gathered that already from the few clues on our methods of work – and of course this echoes with many of the conversations we’ve already had in the last few days.

And perhaps worth also noting is that as a pacifist organization – a quietly subversive one, we do continue to resist all war and preparations for war and believe that the deliberate killing of others denies their humanity. And while keeping that radicalism close to our hearts, our work sometimes does call us to navigate creatively and at times subversively the realities of UN multilateralism and geopolitics.

In and this particular case, speaking of [disarmament and arms control](#), the program that I lead first and foremost seeks to prevent the worst harm, by addressing and curbing the impact of weapons on human rights beyond the right to life and engaging with a wide range of actors including the economic drivers of these exports, namely the businesses behind the bullets. The hope is of course to enhance leadership to think the world otherwise.

And with that in mind, I wanted to speak to you about our work on corporate responsibility – a Quaker concern and following a historical engagement by Quaker on this topic, often leading the way when it comes to ethical trade.

We have found that a key governance gap in the broader immortality of the trading in arms, is exactly that, lacking responsibility of the arms trade and any business involved in the transferring, financing, ensuring and shipping of these weapons.

Indeed, the arms industry has been slow to acknowledge their own human rights responsibilities, and all too often argues that this is discharged by their compliance to state licensing systems. While we do not refute the States' responsibility as licensors of arms transfers, we also argue that the arms sector plays a pivotal role in the manufacture and export of weapons systems across the world. This has been recognized in global standards on business and human rights. Additionally, in situations of armed conflict, companies must also respect international humanitarian law.

We believe that a step in the right direction would be to apply these principles through human rights due diligence policies and processes that are preventive (aimed at preventing human rights harms) as opposed to purely defensive corporate due diligence (aimed at protecting the company itself).

This has brought us to work with many if not exclusively with those who may disagree with the premise - raising awareness of this gap at the Arms Trade Treaty meetings of state parties, at the Human Rights Council through its mechanisms, at the EU level regarding the developments around the EU directive on corporate responsibility alongside partners including QCEA, but also more directly with the industry representatives themselves.

While nothing new for QUNO per se – the case of the arms trade is different. We've had exchanged internally about the risks in engaging in this way, not only internally, with our committee but also with other pacifism organization.

Our own conclusion has been that we need to engage to understand, to transform – and if we believe that there is good in us all, then we also need to assume the same of those who work within the systems are trying to dismantle. And for that, I find the quote from Pierre Cérésole very appropriate.

*'The only rule would be to say: to each his truth which he must find in his conscience.'* Pierre Cérésole  
[Translation from the original french 'La seule règle serait de dire: à chacun sa vérité qu'il doit trouver dans sa conscience']

I will end soon, promise, and will do with a quote from a partner organization who works closely with QUNO on arms control - namely the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

But before that simply wanted to mention that QUNO is turning 75 – and should you wish to participate in any of the celebrations, [check out our website](#), or follow us on social media where you will be seeing some of our lovely faces. For further information on our current work – read out [QUNO Review 2023](#).

Back to my closing quote from [Ray Acheson from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) - and while she speaks of this current war in the Ukraine, I believe it's applicable to all sorts of situations of violence, crisis or destructive conflict in which we should prepare for peace rather than give into violence.

'Many will say that doing anything other than sending more weapons or bolstering global militarism is "unrealistic" as a response to [this] crisis. But it is the credibility of the militarists that must be put in question in this moment, not those working to build the structures and culture for peace, cooperation, and well-being. Everyone who has ever tried to do anything progressive throughout all of history has been accused of being unrealistic. The only reason change has ever occurred in the world is because people ignored those criticisms and kept working. Change is not bestowed upon us by benevolent leaders. Change is compelled by people. Being "unrealistic" means being on the front line of change. It means helping to alter what people conceive of as unrealistic, who they see as credible to speak or act on an issue. And ultimately, it means helping to dismantle the systems of harm and oppression and building something better.'

And that's what I hope we will continue doing as we turn 75."

*Delivered by Florence Foster*

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