

# Acting in **Good Faith**

An illustration featuring two hands, one on the left and one on the right, reaching upwards. The hands are rendered in a dark purple color. From the palms of the hands, numerous leaves of various shades of purple and magenta are scattered upwards and outwards, creating a sense of growth and upward movement. The leaves vary in size and orientation, some pointing towards the top of the frame.

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**Quaker  
Connections**

CASE STUDY

# The Quaker Society

Quakers share a way of life rather than a set of beliefs. They seek to experience God directly, within themselves and in their relationships with others and the world around them. These direct encounters with the Divine are where Quakers find meaning and purpose.

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Quakers do not have priests, appointed ministers, or a hierarchy, as they believe all people can have a direct relationship with God. All Quakers are entitled to participate in decision-making processes and to help run The Society.

Quakers meet together for worship and other activities in local meetings. These are inclusive and open to all. In their meetings they hope to find acceptance, support, challenge, practical help and a sense of belonging. Their sense of community does not depend on professing identical beliefs, but from worshipping, sharing and working together.

The Quaker way has its roots in Christianity and finds inspiration in the Bible and the life and teachings of Jesus. Quakers also find meaning and value in other writings and in the teachings of other faiths and acknowledge that theirs is not the only way. For centuries, Quakers have been involved across a range of social justice challenges. Their religious experience leads them to place a special value on truth, equality, simplicity and peace. These testimonies, as they are known, are lived rather than written. They lead Quakers to translate their faith into action by working locally and globally for social justice, to support peacemakers and care for the environment.

# Quaker Connections

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## Quaker Connections Befriending Service

Quaker Connections Befriending Service is one of a number of projects operated by Quaker Service. Quaker Service is a charity which provides support for people in Northern Ireland going through difficult times. By delivering practical, social and emotional support services that value and empower people just where they are, Quaker Service plays its part in reducing violence, suffering and disadvantage. Its work is often with those in society who are the most forgotten, unpopular or sometimes viewed as “undeserved”. All of the work undertaken by Quaker Service is undertaken to meet an unfulfilled need in the community. Quaker Service is governed by a Management Committee made up of both Quakers and non-Quakers. The ethos of non-judgement and equality of all is central to its work.

Quaker Connections is a befriending service for people in prisons in Northern Ireland. The project offers a befriending service where a befriender visits a prisoner who is isolated or vulnerable. Volunteer befrienders are recruited and prior to placement must complete a number of training modules. The volunteer training is an in-depth process and allows volunteers to fully understand the role and assess whether or not it's suited to them. Most of the training is scenario based with experienced volunteers and staff. In addition to this volunteers receive one-to-one support and regular peer support sessions. People selected to be befrienders are naturally non-judgemental and see the person, beyond their offence.


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People are referred to Quaker Connections in a number of ways. Vulnerable and isolated prisoners are referred by the Support and Safety Team within the prison. This is a multiagency forum that meets weekly to identify interventions for prisoners at risk. Prison officers on the landings and in different houses will identify isolated prisoners whom they feel would benefit from the service. The mental health team often refer their clients as they tend to be the most isolated. Men also self-refer onto the programme. When a referral is made, a worker visits the person to explain the project's services and the support available. Ultimately the person in prison decides whether or not the programme is for them.

Prisoners are usually visited on a weekly basis but this is subject to change. Anyone can work for or volunteer for Quaker Connections. All voluntary and paid colleagues are recruited based on their unique skills and their affinity to the Quaker's core values. The project also works with a small number of non-national prisoners who have found themselves in prison and as well as being isolated from friends and family are further isolated by the language barrier.



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As well as the Befriending Service Quaker Connections deliver specific projects to groups of prisoners. Projects can be developed as a result of requests from prison staff or to address the needs of a group of prisoners which has been identified by volunteers through their peer group support meetings or supervision. Projects are also identified and initiated by the Quaker Connections manager who is in a position to spot emerging needs within the client group. In Hydebank College a volunteer is currently establishing a self-help programme to work with the women when they are feeling low. The programme will involve elements of mindfulness and yoga and will include inputs from motivational speakers.

The purpose of the programme will be to help the women to work through times when their mood is low and to pass on techniques to help them deal with these issues.



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## Links with other partner organisations in the criminal justice system

Quaker Connections is part of the Accessing Services for Offenders (ASFO) group comprising of voluntary sector organisations providing services for people in custody and post release. This group includes Housing Rights, NIACRO, Start 360, Extern Hostels, Samaritans, Cruse, Relate NI, Mindwise, Barnardos, the Prison Arts Foundation, Prison Fellowship, St Vincent de Paul, Chaplaincy and Community Support. Meeting quarterly these organisations are able to identify issues of concern and which service is best placed to address them. These meetings also give organisations an opportunity to learn and share best practice with each other, and identify gaps in service provision.

The project also works with the staff of the Prison Service who facilitate volunteer visits to vulnerable prisoners.

Probation Service also make some referrals and healthcare services within the prisons link with the project but our partnership, essentially, is with the Prison Service staff.

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## How does Quaker Connections make a difference in the lives of people it works with?

Prisoners who do not receive visits are among the most vulnerable people in custody. Quaker Connections volunteering programme provides befriending for the most isolated prisoners. Quaker Connections offers simple human compassion and the difference made is often quite profound. Befriendees have spoken of developing hope and a sense of belonging where they previously had none. As well as helping the individual, this also serves to support resettlement and reduce reoffending.

A 2015 external evaluation of the programme identified the following benefits for users:

*practice in social skills, feelings of normality, enhanced self-esteem and not feeling shut out or abandoned, feeling listened to.*

*It's nice to think that I've got something to look forward to and really the only thing that I have is the visits.*


Project volunteers come from a wide range of backgrounds and volunteer for a variety of reasons. Some have an interest in the criminal justice system, others are inspired by the work and motivated by social justice and the importance of reaching out to another human being who may be struggling. The role gives volunteers a sense of purpose and an opportunity to use their skills.

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## One volunteer spoke about his work with Quaker Connections:



*I have been involved with Quaker Connections on two levels, prisoner visits and also a project hosting drama workshops for a group of 12 prisoners within the Donard Centre (in Maghaberry Prison). I first became aware of the Quaker Connections service through the Volunteer Now website. This is something that I had wanted to get involved with for some time, as a few years ago the theatre group I run had utilised the skills of prisoners at Maghaberry to make scenery. At that time I was given a tour of the prison by the then Governor, Austin Tracey. It struck me then that many of the prisoners had themselves been victims of circumstance, or family issues or peer pressure. At that time I researched theatre workshops within prisons and had found that it was proven to be highly beneficial to the prisoners.*

*This was one aspect I was keen to progress, but through the Quaker Connections and Sinead Bailie, I had the training for prisoner visits.*

*The prisoner visits enables a prisoner to establish a rapport with someone who isn't there on an official basis. They can talk as freely as they wish without any repercussions about their feelings, their experience in prison and concerns they may have about being released. The drama workshops have been a great medium for individuals to open up in a relaxed and non-judgmental environment. In one exercise, several of the prisoners were able to state how much they regretted their crimes and the route they took that resulted in the crime. This was an inspirational approach and was also noted by the mental health team.*



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## What are the key challenges the project faces?

Like the majority of charities in the current financial climate Quaker Service's primary challenge is accessing the funding from donors and from the statutory funders it needs to deliver the services it provides.

PBNI Sentence Manager speaking about Quaker Connections Volunteers:

*Your assistance and support are greatly appreciated and the service your organisation provides has been a blessing to Graham\* and improved his self-esteem, confidence and communication skills beyond belief. I cannot praise your assistance enough.*

(\*name has been changed.)

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## Contact details:

Quaker Service  
541 Lisburn Road  
Belfast  
BT9 7GQ

**T** 028 90201444  
**E** [info@quakerservice.com](mailto:info@quakerservice.com)  
**W** [www.quakerservice.com](http://www.quakerservice.com)



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