

Lively history of Quaker service

By Paul Rule

Heather Saville: *Friends in Deed: Fifty years of Quaker Service Australia*. Quaker Service Australia, Sydney. [Order online](#). From *Eureka Street*, 1 May 2009.

I have long wondered why a comparatively small religious body, the Society of Friends or Quakers, have been so prominent in peace, welfare and aid.

Through Quaker friends I have some inkling of the spirit of concern and opening towards others that leads to prison visitation, involvement in the aftermath of war and care for the poorest. But I sought in vain for more precise answers in the history of Quakers' involvement in aid and development projects over the last 50 years.

The closest we get is a quotation from Mark Deasey's 2002 James Backhouse lecture:

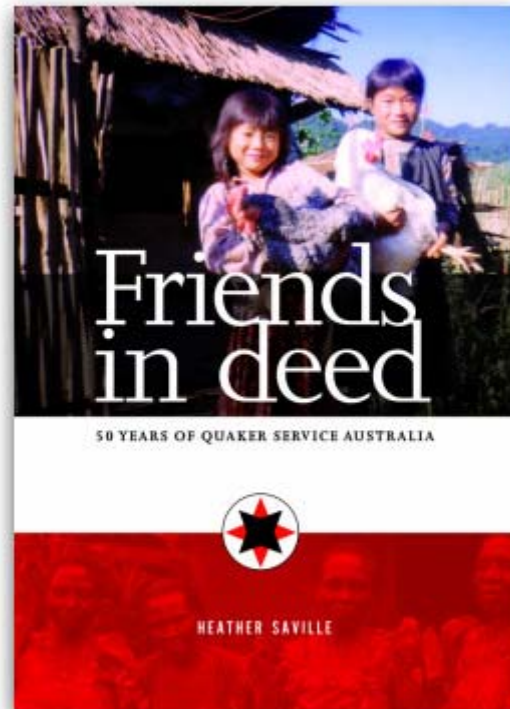
'If we acknowledge the indwelling presence of God in every human being, we inescapably acknowledge that we have an obligation for the wellbeing of others, whether this be through meeting immediate needs (or) seeking to change the order of the world...'

Perhaps my question is the wrong one. We should rather ask why the majority of Christians do not seem to feel this overwhelming sense of mission; why work for social justice is an optional extra not a mainstream activity for all. Or perhaps our involvement is too remote: we contribute money but not our hearts and minds.

The variety of projects initiated or facilitated by Quaker Service Australia in India, Africa, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Australian Aboriginal communities, as described in a lively and people-oriented style by Heather Saville, is extraordinary.

Saville answers the obvious questions. Can small-scale projects such as those of QSA bring about the changes we all want to see? What are the consequences of partnerships with governments? Do women as well as men profit from the projects? And can aid projects be effectively organised from the outside?

There are constant themes. QSA projects have tended to be small-scale, rural and focused on food and water security. Critics of such a concentration are having to



reassess their views in light of climate change and the global financial crisis. Small-scale technology, solar power and permaculture may be the destiny of all of us.

Other themes will be familiar to those involved in overseas aid: the need for local partners, the necessity to hand over completely as soon as possible to avoid dependence, the careful spelling out of obligations and expectations from the beginning and the prescription of major female participation.

The strength of the book lies in the human detail. Key activists, from activities as diverse as developing kitchen gardening, HIV/AIDS education or basic village-level health care, are given a voice in long statements. Four years of interviews and archival research has produced a persuasive justification for the expenditure and volunteer efforts of the organisation.

Most interesting are the chapters on Vietnam and Cambodia. The Quakers used their international links and their reputation for being disinterested and apolitical to sidestep such problems as the US embargo on helping these countries after what Saville rightly calls 'the American War' in Southeast Asia.

Always the schemes were responsive to local conditions. A school cannot function if the children come hungry, so give them breakfast from the produce of the school garden. If AIDS has wiped out much of the male population, women must be trained to take over traditional male roles.

At times the proliferation of acronyms gets a little annoying, but as anyone involved with NGOs (there I go too) knows this is unavoidable, and a three page list at the end of the book is a help. It is also a reminder that successful aid programs require much cooperation from planners, donors, field workers and participants.

And when the money ran low QSA was able to appeal to the international Friends network. This, along with the motivation provided, is a key advantage of religion-based organisations.

Saville is rather coy about the precise nature of internal dissensions in the QSA and the reasons for its shift of headquarters from Hobart to Sydney, which are referred to several times but not commented on. No doubt the fact that she is a former convenor, and that many of the events are recent, makes her reluctant to comment.

The result is that her book is much more a history of projects than of an organisation. But the projects are the *raison d'être* of QSA and no doubt some future historian will fill that gap. Meanwhile we have a more than adequate treatment of a work that all Australians should know about and can be proud of.



Paul Rule has been active in Catholic justice, peace and development bodies and is now a board member of the ecumenical Social Policy Connections and the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy.