

TOOLKIT FOR ACTION



ORGANISING A VIGIL

Silent vigils have a special power. They're easy to organise and anyone can take part, whether for silent prayer, meditation, mindful presence. Or they could simply be a space for reflection and solidarity. Quakers often think of silent vigils as meetings for worship for witness – a public witness to an alternative world of justice and peace. As with a meeting for worship, a vigil's power is experienced by those taking part, but with the added dimension of sharing the power of stillness, silence, and dignity with passers-by and watchers.

Participants can stand in a circle, facing in to each other or out to the public. Or stand in a line facing the public or a particular place. One or two people might stand outside the vigil to offer leaflets, collect signatures for a petition, hold a banner, or talk to anyone who approaches. Visual information is often used to communicate the social/political focus of the vigil.

A silent vigil is gentle and strong. It confronts without being confrontational and affirms the better world that is waiting to emerge. Whether it's a single person (the power of one) or hundreds, a silent vigil is internally strengthening and externally potent.

This guide explores different aspects to consider if you are planning to hold a public vigil or a meeting for worship to witness.

It outlines different steps to consider, including:

- ➔ **Where a vigil should be held**
- ➔ **Who to include**
- ➔ **When to hold a vigil**
- ➔ **What you might need for a vigil.**



Young Quakers holding a meeting for worship for witness outside the British Museum, against sponsorship from BP. Photo credit: Britain Yearly Meeting



Deciding to hold a vigil

The decision to hold a vigil should be spirit-led. Vigils can be a visible witness to an issue of concern or importance to you or your meeting. Many Friends also use vigils to uphold those involved in unjust systems, or to stand in solidarity with those affected.

Anyone joining a vigil should come with heart and mind prepared, as they would to any other meeting for worship.

Consult the 'Organising actions' toolkit if you are unsure if a vigil would be the most appropriate action to take to express the concern or inner prompting to which you're responding to.

Where should a vigil be held?

Choose somewhere visible or symbolic to increase the vigil's impact. If the vigil is in a public place, think about if there is anyone you might want to inform ahead of time. Alternatively, you could ask permission to hold it on the steps of a centrally-located place of worship. Remember that the organisers of a vigil are legally responsible for it, so think through any implications of the location you choose. You can find out more about your rights at greenandblackcross.org.

Who might it include?

As we discuss in the 'Organising actions' toolkit, ensure you have enough people taking on roles to ensure the success of your vigil. Consider if you want people beyond your organising group to come. If so, how can you promote it, both within your meeting and the wider community? Are there people you would like to be present, for example those directly affected by the issue you are witnessing? You might want to link up with other faith groups, local churches, or non-faith groups taking action on similar issues.



Quaker Faith & Practice, 24.28

The following is the testimony of a Friend who participated in the vigil, inspired and sustained by women, against the cruise missile base at Greenham Common in the 1980s.

I stood at the fence one night in September, feet rooted to the muddy ground, hands deep in my pockets, watching through the wire that flat ravaged land that is now never dark, never quiet, imagining through the fence a field of bracken and scrub, a field of flowers, a field of corn, a field of children playing. Red police car, blue lights flashing, 'What are you doing, then, love? Not cutting the fence are you?' 'No, just praying at it.' A soldier with a dog walks up and down inside, suspicious, watching me watching him. 'Good evening.' 'Good evening.' I wait, not knowing what I'm waiting for. The kingdoms of the Lord? A hundred yards to my left, women cut the wire, roll away the stone, and walk through into the tomb. No angels greet them; no resurrection yet.

Yet still women witness to that possibility, the possibility that something may be accomplished which in our own strength we cannot do. Women waiting, watching, just being there, behaving as if peace were possible, living our dream of the future now. 'Why do you come here? Why do you keep coming?' – A soldier near Emerald camp on an earlier visit – 'It's no use, there's nothing you can do, what do you women think you can do by coming here? The missiles are here, you won't change anything, why do you come?' We come to watch, we come to witness, we come with our hands full of ribbon and wool, flowers and photos of loved ones, hands full of poems and statements and prayers, hands full of hope and the knowledge that such hope is impossible to rational minds. I come to be with the women who live here, the dykes, the dropouts, the mothers and grandmothers, angels with countenances like lightning, I come to talk with the police, the soldiers, men who might be gardeners standing by the tomb; I come to meet the Christ in them.

A member of the Quaker Women's Group, 1986



Timing your vigil

Try to pick a busy time, such as the evening rush hour or on a Saturday afternoon during a peak shopping period. If you're holding a vigil outside a specific event, think about when people are likely to be arriving or leaving.

A manageable duration for a vigil is 45 minutes to one hour. This is long enough to be meaningful and have impact, but short enough to avoid people feeling unable to take part due to time commitments or other constraints. Consider the needs of those who may not be able to stand for too long. The weather may also be a factor on the day – it's best to keep it under one hour if people are getting cold and wet.

Props to bring

A collection of candles in jars is easily acquired and can have a striking effect at evening vigils.

It's also a good idea to have at least one banner or placard that explains your basic message. Take some time to ensure that your message will be clear, accessible and visible to passers-by. You could also hand out leaflets communicating key messages and information. You might want to include a contact, such as an email address, so that people can follow up with you afterwards.

Gathering signatures for a petition can also help you engage with the public. After the vigil, you could hand the petition in to a local MP or council, or the relevant business or institution.

Consider other ways to make your presence distinctive. You might want to ask people to wear the same colour or something symbolic to the issue. You could also include music, singing, or spoken word.

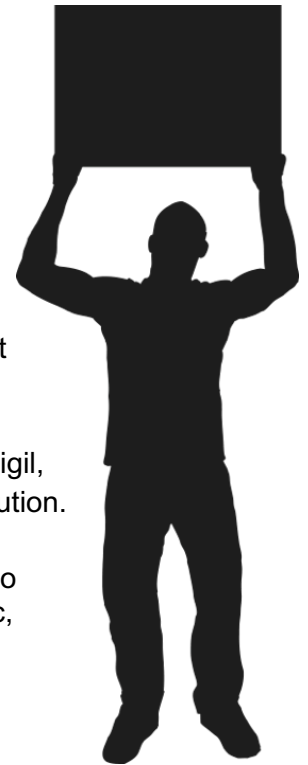
Considering passers-by

A vigil is intended to attract attention and there may be different responses to your presence. Some will stop in curiosity or to affirm what you are doing, or may join with you. Others may have opposing views, and express them to you. The unity in your vigil should help you stand strong and hold to your witness in the face of this.

A vigil can be a great opportunity to have conversations with members of the public and decision-makers. You might want to allocate responsibility for talking to passers-by to people in the group, so that others can remain focused on the vigil itself. Those people will need to feel confident of the group's key messages, and will need to be able to explain some background information about the issue.

Roles

There are a number of different roles that people can fill on a vigil. Not all vigils will need all of these roles to be filled. Think about the context of your vigil and if you would like to have someone in your group to take on one or more of these roles.



Engaging passers-by

You may want to allocate one or two people to engage passers-by, either by speaking to them or handing out a leaflet or other information you have prepared prior to the vigil.

If your group wish to collect signatures for a petition, consider whether those collecting are part of the vigil, stepping out if needed, or independent of it so that the stillness of the vigil is maintained.

Make your vigil even more effective

Tell other people about your vigil before or after, to share your message further.

- ★ Send a press release to your local newspaper, and/or telling your local radio and television stations about it. Read the '[reaching the media](#)' toolkit for more information.
- ★ Use your meeting's social media or newsletter. Read the '[Using social media](#)' toolkit for more information.
- ★ Write to, or arrange to meet with, your MP and/or local councillors. Read the [Contacting an MP guide](#) that is part of the Toolkit for Action.
- ★ Contact the Faith in Action team at faithinaction@quaker.org.uk. As part of Quakers in Britain, they can help with publicity.

Timekeeping (Eldering)

Before your vigil starts people may find it helpful to have an idea of when the vigil will end, and how it will end. It may be helpful to have a timekeeper, or someone to elder the vigil. This person should hold the stillness and prayerful nature of your vigil until the end. A watch or phone to check the time can help someone end the vigil after the allocated time.

Organising visual information

If placards or a banner have been prepared to communicate your vigil's message, enlist people to hold these. Alternatively, the signs could be laid flat on the ground by your vigil or be tied or leant against railings or fences close by. Make sure that one person takes pictures to record the event.

After the vigil

Those joining a vigil may appreciate an opportunity to get to know one other after it ends. Those conversations may also invite deeper continuing involvement. Consider inviting all attendees to do something social together afterwards.

A 40-year peace vigil – Annette Wallis, Leicester Meeting

In 1979 Leicester's peace group was fired up in response to Mrs Thatcher and cruise missiles! A large number of very creative ideas were put into motion, including the first of our regular Quaker peace vigils. We held these weekly outside the meeting house over the next 40 years.

We got a regular flow of students and other passers-by, attracted by banners, and tables set out with more information. We would engage people in discussion and get those who were willing to sign the current peace letter or petition. We also had our "regular supporters" who would sometimes join us for part of our vigils when they could.

Our vigils were one way to witness to the world we wanted and was just one form of witness that we took together as a Leicester Quakers peace group through those years. It was a long and purposeful effort but as with all good things, our weekly vigils came to an end. The work for peace continues, of course.



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Interfaith walk of witness – Central England Quakers

Quakers in Birmingham were involved in bringing together people of different faiths to take collective action for a low-carbon future.

In November 2015 they helped organise an interfaith walk of witness and vigil for the climate. Their prayerful walk went through pedestrianised areas of Birmingham city centre.

Representatives from the local Quaker, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities all joined the walk which was timed to take place at the start of the Paris United Nations Climate Change Conference. During the same week there were thousands of other walks organised around the world to draw attention to climate issues in local communities.

During the vigil and the walk people reflected on the challenges of being good stewards of the earth and its resources, as well as the steps that can be taken to build a more hopeful future.

Since organising and participating in this vigil, members of the different faith communities have continued to work together and have set up **Footsteps: faiths for a low carbon future**. This brings together faith groups in Birmingham to respond to the challenge of moving towards a low carbon future.



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