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FCL and the California Legislature: Looking Backwards

In his own words!

Joe Gunterman, 1961 - 1975:

One always has a few silent, puzzling questions when one comes onto a new job. When I, a non-Quaker without lobbying experience, became a lobbyist for a Quaker lobbying group sometime in 1961, I had my questions.

Whom did I represent as lobbyist for the Friends Committee on Legislation? Not the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), which has no official spokespersons nor set creed. I would represent a few thousand "Friends and like-minded citizens" who supported a legislative program centering on "Quaker concerns."

What was a Quaker concern? Basic Quaker belief, I knew, was that there was "that of the Light in every person." (Some Quakers spoke of "God" or "Christ" instead of "the Light.") If every person had something of the Light in him/her, then no person was completely evil or depraved. You didn't reject him/her; you tried to appeal to that inner Light—yes, in legislators, too.

You can't get more accepting or egalitarian than that, I figured. So Quaker concerns would be found in any of the three thousand bills introduced each year that affected people's freedom to follow the Light.

Still big was the so-called "loyalty oath" issue, which the FCL had worked on since 1952. All public employees were required to sign an oath that they did not advocate, nor belong to any group advocating, the overthrow of government by force. This forced disclaimer of disloyalty violated the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech by forbidding advocacy.

The FCL also was working for "fair housing," for the right of blacks—and other minority citizens—to buy or to rent a home wherever they chose—another Quaker concern with a long history. Early Quakers also had tried to deal peaceably and fairly with the "Indians"; the FCL in 1961 was helping California's Native Americans to present their protests and pleas to the state government.

Farm workers in 1961 still were excluded from most of the state laws benefitting other workers. Over the following years the FCL would hoe the legislative rows with farm worker representatives for disability/unemployment insurance coverage, a minimum wage, toilets and drinking water on the job sites, safe working conditions, housing, and bargaining rights.

Quakers from their beginning visited and assisted those in prisons. In the 1960's, California still had a "civil death" statute, under which a person convicted of a felony lost virtually all rights before the law. The statute was the keystone for other laws and regulations under which prison officials could control inmate lives, including limiting their mail, censoring their correspondence, and censoring their reading.

The FCL helped Assemblyman Alan

Sieroty to repeal the civil death statute. In the 1960's and '70's, the FCL helped to secure changes in other laws, covering inmate working conditions on prison jobs, correspondence, books, education, release and parole.

Then, as now, the FCL lobbyist represented only a few thousand voters. The FCL never endorsed or opposed candidates. As a matter of principle, it would not have given money to an election campaign even if it had any to give. As a lobby, it had no muscle.

In a way, that helped. The Quakers of American school history books are a simple, honest, non-violent, devout folk. Since the FCL posed no threat, even legislators opposed to the FCL position could give an attentive ear to the FCL lobbyist. On tight counts—and most counts on FCL issues were tight—you never could be sure from where that last, winning vote would come. Lobbying on a non-partisan basis was critically important.

Once a conservative Senator agreed to carry a small bill for the FCL, if I would agree to stay away whenever he brought it up for a hearing. I did. He got it through.

(Joe Gunterman is now retired and lives in Sacramento when he isn't off building trails in the mountains. He and his wife Emma, a long-time lobbyist for seniors at the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, remain involved in community activities—and in their garden.)