

Cultivating Collective Care: A Blueprint for Mutual Aid between Bear Creek Friends Meeting and Earlham, Iowa



Earlham, Iowa

Executive Summary

This report meticulously examines the profound congruence between mutual aid principles and core Quaker tenets, advocating for its adoption as a transformative pathway for justice work within Quaker communities. It delineates mutual aid as a form of collective liberation, fundamentally distinct from traditional charity, and analyzes its historical and philosophical resonance with Quaker testimonies such as the Inner Light, non-hierarchy, and the pursuit of Beloved Community. Drawing upon successful models like Des Moines Mutual Aid and historical examples from the Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative), the analysis evaluates the benefits of mutual aid in addressing systemic injustices including capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism. It also identifies the inherent challenges of integrating such a model within existing Quaker structures, framing these as opportunities for spiritual renewal. Practical, actionable steps are proposed for Bear Creek Friends Meeting, exemplified by a localized case study for the Earlham, Iowa area, to foster direct engagement, build solidarity, and meet community survival needs. Ultimately, this report synthesizes these findings to assert that embracing mutual aid is not merely an act of service but a spiritual imperative for contemporary Quakers to live out their testimonies in transformative action.¹

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Cultivating Collective Care

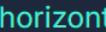
A Visual Blueprint for Mutual Aid in Bear Creek & Earlham, Iowa

Beyond Charity: A Shift to Solidarity

Mutual aid is a transformative practice where communities take collective responsibility for caring for one another. It moves beyond the traditional, hierarchical model of charity to build new social relations based on solidarity and shared power. This infographic explores how these principles align with core Quaker values to offer a powerful path for justice work, drawing inspiration from existing movements to propose a tangible blueprint for local action.

Mutual Aid

 **Solidarity:** Acknowledges shared struggle and collective liberation.

 **Horizontal:** Power is shared equally among all participants.

 **Goal:** Systemic change and building autonomous, resilient communities.

 **Outcome:** Empowerment, self-reliance, and new social relationships.

Traditional Charity

 **Benevolence:** Based on pity or the goodness of the giver.

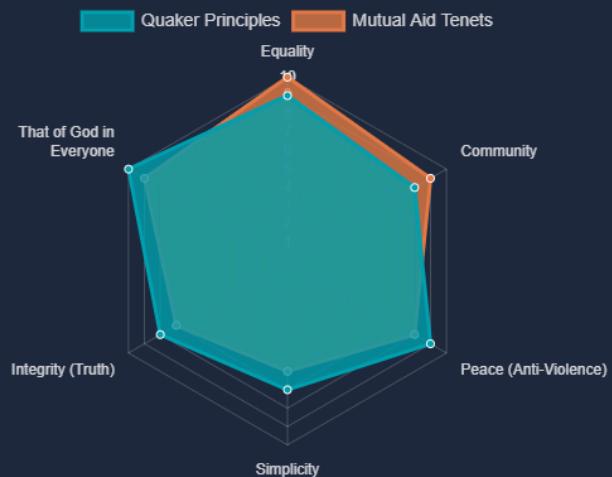
 **Hierarchical:** A top-down relationship between giver and receiver.

 **Goal:** Alleviating symptoms and providing temporary relief.

 **Outcome:** Can create dependency and reinforces the status quo.

A Shared Spirit: Quakerism & Mutual Aid

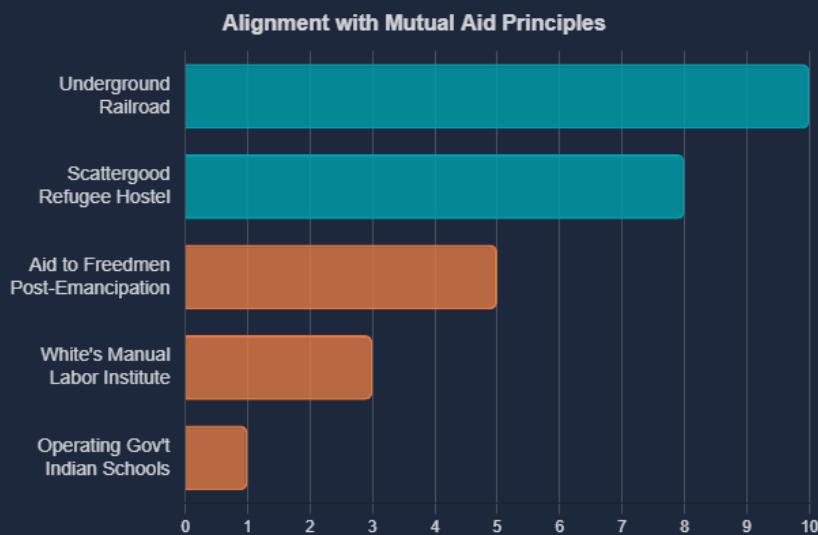
The principles of mutual aid deeply resonate with foundational Quaker testimonies. This alignment suggests that mutual aid is not a new or foreign concept, but a natural extension of living out Quaker faith through direct, Spirit-led action in the world.



This radar chart visualizes the strong philosophical overlap. "That of God in Everyone" provides the ethical foundation for solidarity, while testimonies of Equality, Community, and Peace align with mutual aid's goals of non-hierarchical, collective action to dismantle structural violence.

A Legacy of Action: Learning from History

Quaker history includes powerful examples of both charity and true mutual aid. Understanding this distinction is crucial. Actions rooted in solidarity empower, while top-down benevolence, even when well-intentioned, can cause harm and reinforce injustice.



This chart contrasts historical actions based on their alignment with mutual aid principles. The Underground Railroad, a high-risk collaboration with freedom seekers, exemplifies solidarity. In contrast, operating government assimilation schools, despite benevolent framing, was a harmful, non-reciprocal act of imposed charity.

A Blueprint for Earlham: Proposed Mutual Aid Projects

Based on local needs and successful models like Des Moines Mutual Aid, Bear Creek Meeting and the Earlham community can initiate tangible projects that build collective power and address immediate survival needs.



Community Food Hub

Establish a community garden and food redistribution network to ensure access to fresh, healthy food, fostering food sovereignty and connection.



Housing Support Network

Create a network for eviction support, tenant advocacy, and connecting neighbors with safe, temporary shelter, addressing housing instability.



Skill-Sharing Exchange

Host workshops where community members share practical skills like home repair, car maintenance, or digital literacy, building collective capacity.



Introduction: Cultivating Collective Care in Earlham

This report explores how the Bear Creek Friends Meeting community and the nearby Earlham, Iowa, area can collaboratively develop and strengthen mutual aid resources. The initiative is rooted in a deep commitment to social justice and community building, drawing inspiration from the lifelong dedication of individuals like Jeff Kisling, whose journey into mutual aid is profoundly shaped by spiritual experience and a connection to the Bear Creek community.¹

Defining Mutual Aid: Beyond Charity, Towards Liberation

Mutual aid represents a foundational approach where individuals and communities collaboratively address each other's needs directly, operating outside of or in direct challenge to prevailing societal systems that are often inadequate or actively failing to meet fundamental human requirements.¹ This practice is built upon core principles of direct action, cooperation, mutual understanding, and solidarity, fostering new social relationships where individuals contribute what they can and receive what they need. It moves beyond competitive paradigms and dependency on external authorities to cultivate collective agency.¹ While undeniably critical during emergencies, mutual aid is also a daily practice for navigating the pervasive injustices of society, aiming to build a future characterized by justice, equality, equity, and freedom in the immediate present.¹

The distinction between mutual aid and traditional charity is profound and critical to understanding its transformative potential.¹ Charity typically establishes a hierarchical divide between those who provide assistance and those who receive it, often with implicit conditions or expectations, thereby fostering a sense of dependency and paternalism.¹ It frequently operates within, and by extension, reinforces existing power structures, often acting as a stopgap measure that addresses symptoms without challenging root causes.¹

In stark contrast, mutual aid is deeply rooted in solidarity, recognizing and affirming the inherent equality of all participants.¹ It emphasizes collective care and shared responsibility, actively promoting self-reliance and collaboration rather than dependency. This approach is not merely a shift in what is done, but a profound

reorientation in how individuals relate to and empower others, moving from being a benevolent provider to a co-participant and facilitator.¹ The consistent emphasis on distinguishing mutual aid from charity across various sources underscores this as a foundational concept for the entire discussion, highlighting its role as a philosophical and practical pivot point for Quaker engagement.¹ Understanding this distinction is paramount to grasping the report's core argument, as it guides how communities, including Quakers, can engage in truly transformative work.

The table below further clarifies these fundamental differences, providing a concise visual summary essential for framing the report's argument.¹

| Criterion | Mutual Aid | Charity |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Source of Help | Community-led, Grassroots | Institutional, Top-down |
| Relationship Dynamic | Horizontal, Equal, Reciprocal | Giver/Receiver, Hierarchical |
| Goal | Liberation, Collective Systemic Change, Meeting Needs | Symptom Alleviation, Temporary Relief, Alleviating Suffering |
| Underlying Philosophy | Solidarity, Shared Responsibility, Collective Agency | Benevolence, Pity, Individual Goodness |
| Power Structure | Decentralized, Autonomous | Centralized, Hierarchical |
| Outcome | Self-Reliance, Empowerment, New Social Relations | Dependency, Reinforces Status Quo |

The Spirit of Solidarity: Quakerism's Deep Alignment with Mutual Aid

This section explores the profound philosophical and historical alignment between mutual aid principles and core Quaker beliefs, demonstrating that embracing mutual aid is a natural extension of Quaker identity.

"That of God in Everyone": The Foundation for Mutual Care

The foundational Quaker belief in "that of God in every person" asserts the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings.¹ This principle provides a profound ethical basis for non-violence and equality. This belief naturally leads to a practice of solidarity and mutual understanding, directly contrasting with the hierarchical and often dehumanizing dynamics of traditional charity.¹ Recognizing the divine in each person necessitates treating all as equals in a shared struggle for liberation.¹ This concept is presented not merely as a theological belief but as a direct impetus for mutual aid, transforming abstract faith into tangible, egalitarian action. It lays the theological groundwork for mutual aid by recognizing the inherent worth, agency, and potential contribution of every individual, thereby directly explaining why mutual aid resonates so deeply with Quakerism.¹ This implies that the core spiritual belief of Quakers compels them towards mutual aid, particularly in its non-hierarchical form, making it a spiritual imperative rather than merely a social program.

Spirit-Led Action and Non-Hierarchical Structures

Quakers seek a direct, unmediated experience of God or the Spirit, believing that this "Inner Light" guides them towards truth, unity, and love, shaping both personal conduct and corporate behavior.¹ Quaker testimonies are not rigid dogmas but "spiritually-led actions" arising from deep inner conviction.¹ Mutual aid, characterized by "direct action" and the immediate meeting of needs, aligns seamlessly with this Quaker emphasis on living out one's faith through practical, Spirit-guided engagement in the world.¹ It provides a tangible outlet for the promptings of love and

truth in the heart.¹

Quakerism operates on the principle of the "priesthood of all believers," meaning every individual has direct access to the divine and is equally responsible for ministry in word and deed, fundamentally rejecting religious hierarchy and intermediaries.¹ The Quaker business method, where decisions are made through patient waiting upon the "Divine Spirit" to achieve "loving unity" rather than through voting or majority rule, mirrors the horizontal, consensus-seeking nature of mutual aid.¹ Mutual aid explicitly embraces "horizontal mutual aid" and "community autonomy," rejecting "top-down models of charity" and seeking to build self-sustaining communities independent of hierarchical state structures.¹ This structural alignment highlights that Quakerism already possesses internal mechanisms and a philosophical framework inherently compatible with how mutual aid operates, making Quaker meetings fertile ground for mutual aid.¹ This suggests that Quakers are not adopting a foreign concept but rather re-applying their own deeply ingrained practices to external community work, making integration less about learning new methods and more about extending existing spiritual and organizational strengths outwards.

The Pursuit of "Beloved Community": A Shared Vision of Justice

The concept of the "Beloved Community," popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., envisions a realistic and achievable global society where poverty, hunger, homelessness, racism, and all forms of discrimination are eradicated.¹ It is a community built on love, trust, and peaceful conflict resolution, achieved through a commitment to nonviolence.¹ The "Triple Evils" of Poverty, Racism, and Militarism are identified as the primary barriers to achieving this Beloved Community.¹ Mutual aid, by directly addressing basic survival needs (such as food and housing), challenging the carceral state (through bail funds and abolitionist work), and building community independence, actively works to dismantle these "Triple Evils" and create the conditions necessary for the Beloved Community to flourish.¹

The Beloved Community is not a passive, utopian ideal but an actionable vision that demands active commitment to nonviolence and the dismantling of these "Triple Evils".¹ Mutual aid, particularly in its abolitionist and anti-capitalist forms, directly confronts these systemic barriers.¹ By providing direct support and building alternative structures, mutual aid actively works to eliminate the conditions of poverty, racism, and militarism.¹ For Quakers, this means mutual aid becomes a concrete,

Spirit-led path to actively build the Beloved Community, moving beyond abstract ideals to tangible, transformative work that dismantles oppressive structures.¹ Mutual aid, by actively building alternative systems and dismantling these "Triple Evils," transforms the aspirational "Beloved Community" into a form of prefigurative politics—a future already being built in the present.¹ This shifts the vision from a distant ideal to an active, ongoing project, offering Quakers a concrete methodology for realizing their vision of a just world now, rather than waiting for large-scale systemic change. It provides a powerful, tangible witness to the possibility of alternative ways of living and relating, making the "Beloved Community" a lived experience.¹

Building on a Legacy: Historical Mutual Aid in Quaker Communities

This section provides a historical overview of Quaker engagement in aid, carefully distinguishing between instances that align with traditional charity and those that exemplify mutual aid principles. The Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) (IYM(C)) has a rich history dating back to the mid-17th century Christian movement of the Religious Society of Friends in England, with its presence in Iowa established in 1835.¹ The term "Conservative" signifies its commitment to preserving traditional Quaker practices as believed and practiced in the mid-19th century.¹

Predominantly Charitable Tendencies

Historically, many of IYM(C)'s social welfare initiatives predominantly exhibited characteristics of charity, often structured as top-down provisions.¹ White's Iowa Manual Labor Institute, founded in 1856 through a bequest for "poor children," exemplifies this, operating as a benevolent provider of care, education, and moral guidance, establishing a clear benefactor-beneficiary relationship.¹ Similarly, aid to freedmen post-Emancipation, involving the "giving freely of money, possessions and services as teachers," while impactful, largely operated as a one-way provision of resources.¹

A more problematic example of a charitable approach is the IYM(C)'s involvement in Indian Affairs. Despite a stated "sense of justice," Quaker participation in the U.S. government's assimilation policies, including the operation of Indian boarding schools, was a top-down effort to replace Native cultures with European American lifestyles.¹ Children were forcibly removed from their families, punished for speaking Native languages, and banned from traditional practices, leading to lasting harm.¹ This approach, despite its stated benevolent intentions, lacked reciprocity and was deeply harmful, representing a form of imposed charity rather than solidarity.¹ This historical example reveals a historical blind spot where benevolent intent led to harmful, non-reciprocal, and assimilative practices, serving as a cautionary tale for modern mutual aid efforts.¹ It underscores the critical need for genuine solidarity and community leadership in contemporary mutual aid efforts, actively avoiding the pitfalls of "white saviorism".¹

Instances and Elements of Mutual Aid

Despite the prevalence of charitable models, the history of IYM(C) also contains compelling examples that align strongly with mutual aid principles, demonstrating reciprocal relationships, collective action, and a focus on solidarity.¹ The IYM(C)'s "Advices and Queries" explicitly articulate a principle of "Mutual Care" within the meeting community, stating, "Each of us is both giver and receiver, ready to help and to accept help".¹ This foundational, ongoing practice embodies the reciprocal nature of mutual aid within the IYM(C)'s own spiritual and social fabric.¹

The IYM(C)'s active role in the Underground Railroad is a powerful historical example of mutual aid.¹ Quakers served as "conductors" and "station agents," directly collaborating with freedom seekers to facilitate their escape from slavery.¹ This was not a detached act of benevolence but a high-stakes, direct participation in a collective struggle against systemic injustice. Freedom seekers and Quakers shared a common goal and faced shared risks, demonstrating solidarity and collective responsibility, aligning with Dean Spade's facets of mutual aid.¹

The operation of the Scattergood Hostel during World War II (1939-1943) provides another clear instance of mutual aid.¹ European refugees were not simply housed and fed; they were "expected to take part in work crews as well as helping to grow and prepare their food" alongside volunteers.¹ This reciprocal arrangement transformed the hostel into a collective endeavor for survival and resettlement, embodying the principle that everyone has something to offer and something to receive.¹

Contemporary activities of IYM(C) members, such as supporting "Healing Our Borders" by distributing blankets and holding vigils for migrants, and co-facilitating "Alternative to Violence Project" workshops in prisons, also contain strong elements of mutual aid.¹ These actions involve direct engagement and solidarity with marginalized groups, addressing immediate survival needs while implicitly challenging the systemic issues that create their vulnerability.¹ These historical examples demonstrate that radical, solidarity-based action is not new to Quakerism but a return to its "revolutionary origins".¹ This provides a powerful narrative of continuity and inspiration, showing that Quakers have historically risen to the challenge of systemic injustice through direct action, reinforcing that the "Spirit-led" action of early Friends directly manifested as mutual aid.

Understanding the Local Context: Bear Creek Meeting and Earlham, Iowa

This section bridges the theoretical and historical discussions with the specific local reality of Bear Creek Friends Meeting and its surrounding community.

Existing Strengths and Resources of Bear Creek Friends Meeting

Bear Creek Friends Meeting is situated at 16193 Bear Creek Rd., Earlham, IA 50072, and is an integral part of the Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative).¹ The meeting maintains an established community structure, evidenced by its regular Sunday School and Worship services.¹ As part of the Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative), Bear Creek Meeting adheres to the "Mutual Care" advice, which emphasizes the welfare of each individual within the meeting community and fosters a spirit of giving and receiving help.¹ They also practice seeking "Divine guidance" in their "Meeting for Business" to achieve loving unity, a form of consensus-based decision-making.¹

The Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) includes active Young Friends programs, with themes like "Accompaniment and Giving Voice" and participation in service projects such as harvesting at Scattergood Farm, suggesting a potential for active youth engagement and a willingness to contribute practically.¹ Furthermore, some Friends in Iowa have demonstrated engagement in environmental justice by working to protect water and stop fossil fuel pipelines, indicating existing concerns that could be leveraged for mutual aid.¹ The Bear Creek Meetinghouse itself has received donations for maintenance, including termite control, suggesting it is a well-maintained facility that could potentially serve as a community resource.¹ Bear Creek Meeting's existing internal "mutual care" and non-hierarchical decision-making provide a strong internal infrastructure that can be directly leveraged and extended outwards for mutual aid, reducing the barrier of needing to build new organizational structures from scratch.¹ This means that Bear Creek is not starting from scratch; its internal spiritual and organizational practices are already a form of mutual aid, and the challenge is primarily one of reorientation and expansion of existing capacities, rather than entirely new creation.

Identifying Specific Local Needs in the Earlham, IA Area

While specific, granular needs for the Earlham area are not detailed in the provided information, potential needs can be inferred from the broader Iowa context and the nature of mutual aid principles.¹ These include:

- **Food Insecurity:** Even in rural areas, access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food can be a challenge. The mention of heavy rains and flooding in Iowa also points to agricultural vulnerabilities that could impact food access.¹
- **Housing/Eviction Vulnerability:** Drawing from Des Moines Mutual Aid's focus on houseless individuals and eviction relief, there may be individuals or families facing housing instability, particularly in rural areas with limited social services.¹
- **Environmental Concerns:** Given the existing engagement of Friends in Iowa with protecting water and opposing pipelines, local environmental issues related to land stewardship, water quality, or climate resilience could be pressing.¹
- **Support for Marginalized Populations:** This could encompass support for Indigenous communities (given the LANDBACK focus), migrant workers, or other vulnerable groups in the surrounding area.¹
- **Parental/Family Support:** Adapting the successful Quaker Parent Mutual Support Groups to address local family needs (e.g., childcare, elder care, resource sharing) could be valuable.¹

The inference of needs based on broader contexts and successful mutual aid models suggests a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to identifying community needs.¹ This aligns with mutual aid's goal of addressing root causes before crises escalate. This proactive identification is itself a form of political consciousness raising, connecting broader systemic issues to potential local manifestations, implying that a mutual aid approach anticipates needs based on an understanding of systemic failures. While Bear Creek should conduct its own community listening sessions, these inferred needs provide a valuable starting point for their community assessment.¹

A Blueprint for Action: Developing Mutual Aid Resources in Earlham

This section outlines concrete, actionable steps and project ideas for Bear Creek Meeting and the Earlham community to develop mutual aid resources, emphasizing participatory and Spirit-led approaches.

Proposing Participatory Projects for Bear Creek Meeting and Earlham

Based on identified needs and successful models, Bear Creek Meeting could initiate several participatory projects ¹:

- **Community Food Hub/Garden & Redistribution:** Drawing inspiration from Des Moines Mutual Aid's "Panther Pantry" and Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative)'s Young Friends' harvesting activities, Bear Creek could establish a community garden on meeting land or partner with local farms to collect surplus produce. This food could then be redistributed weekly to local families in need, fostering food sovereignty and community connection.¹
- **Rural Housing/Eviction Support Network:** Leveraging Des Moines Mutual Aid's eviction relief efforts, Bear Creek could establish a network of Friends and community members to offer temporary shelter, connect individuals to housing resources, or provide advocacy for tenants' rights in the local area. This could also involve supporting local efforts to address homelessness.¹
- **Skill-Sharing & Resource Exchange Workshops:** Based on the mutual aid principle of sharing skills, the meeting could host regular workshops where Friends and community members share practical skills (e.g., basic home repair, gardening, food preservation, car maintenance, digital literacy, legal aid clinics). This builds community capacity and self-reliance.¹
- **Land Stewardship & Environmental Justice Initiatives:** Building on existing Quaker environmental concerns and the principles of LANDBACK, Bear Creek could initiate projects focused on local ecological restoration, sustainable agriculture practices, or advocating for clean water. This could involve partnering with local Indigenous groups or environmental organizations.¹
- **Community Care & Mutual Support Pods:** Adapting the successful Quaker Parent Mutual Support Groups, Bear Creek could facilitate the creation of small,

self-organized "pods" within the wider Earlham community. These pods would provide mutual support for everyday needs, crisis response, and resource sharing, fostering deeper community bonds.¹

The proposed projects are not just generic aid programs but are explicitly linked to successful, anti-systemic mutual aid models, ensuring that the "radical" and "liberation" aspects of mutual aid are maintained in the local context.¹ This emphasizes that these are not just any projects, but projects designed to embody the transformative potential of mutual aid, chosen because they address root causes, build community power, and challenge existing structures, rather than merely providing temporary relief.

Leveraging Spiritual Practices to Foster Action and Non-Hierarchy

Bear Creek Meeting can effectively integrate these projects by leveraging its existing spiritual practices ¹:

- **Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Mutual Aid:** Dedicate specific Meeting for Worship sessions to collectively discern local needs and Spirit-led responses. This practice allows for vocal ministry that arises from direct engagement with community struggles, grounding action in spiritual guidance.¹
- **Clearness Committees for Mutual Aid Projects:** Utilize the established Quaker clearness committee model to support individuals or groups initiating mutual aid projects. This ensures projects are Spirit-led, align with Quaker principles, and are held in love and accountability by the wider meeting.¹
- **Consensus-Based Decision Making:** Apply the Quaker business method to all mutual aid projects, ensuring that decisions are made through patient discernment and "loving unity" among all participants, rather than through hierarchical leadership. This reinforces horizontal structures and shared ownership.¹
- **"That of God in Everyone" in Practice:** Actively seek and affirm the inherent worth, wisdom, and agency of all community members involved in mutual aid, especially those who are typically marginalized. Ensure their voices lead the initiatives, embodying the principle of equality and challenging traditional power dynamics.¹

The integration of Quaker spiritual practices into mutual aid project management suggests that the process of mutual aid can itself be a spiritual practice, deepening faith through direct engagement.¹ This transforms mutual aid from a task into a form of worship. The Iowa Yearly Meeting's "Mutual Care" advice provides a strong foundation for internal community support.¹ The crucial step for Bear Creek is to intentionally extend this ethos of care and shared responsibility outward, beyond the meeting's immediate fellowship, to the wider Earlham community.¹ This involves actively seeking out and building relationships with non-Quaker neighbors based on shared needs and collective action, rather than a one-way provision of services.¹ This expansion transforms the meeting from a place of internal comfort to a vibrant hub of community resilience and justice, making its spiritual practices tangible and relevant to the struggles of its local environment, and demonstrating the power of Quaker principles in addressing real-world problems.¹ This outward focus can also revitalize the meeting itself by deepening its sense of purpose and connection to the world, potentially attracting new individuals seeking meaningful community and

transformative action.¹

Lessons from Practice: Des Moines Mutual Aid as a Model for Local Action

This section presents Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) as a concrete, successful example of abolitionist mutual aid praxis, demonstrating how its principles and projects can inspire and inform Bear Creek's efforts.

Key Projects and Operational Principles (Points of Unity)

Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) was founded in 2019 as an "abolitionist collective," emerging as a direct response to the city of Des Moines' "continued violence to our houseless relatives".¹ Since its founding, DMMA has rapidly expanded its scope and organized numerous projects aimed at strengthening communities and nurturing the "radical potential inherent in all of us".¹

DMMA provides crucial "material and court support for our Houseless neighbors," addressing immediate survival needs.¹ It operates a "Bail Fund, legal, and court support for our street warriors," directly challenging the carceral state and supporting those impacted by state repression.¹ A significant project is "The Panther Pantry," a weekly free grocery re-distribution program, which consciously draws inspiration from and continues the legacy of the Des Moines Chapter of The Black Panther Party, a historical example of radical mutual aid.¹ DMMA also runs a "Criminal Records Expungement Program" in collaboration with the Des Moines Abolition Coalition, working to dismantle the long-term effects of state punishment.¹

Des Moines Mutual Aid operates under a clear set of "Points of Unity," which articulate its foundational principles and distinguish its work from traditional approaches.¹ These include:

- **Solidarity, Not Charity:** DMMA explicitly states, "We believe in working shoulder to shoulder and standing in solidarity with all oppressed communities. We ourselves are oppressed, and our mutual aid work is a fight for our collective

liberation. We do not believe in a top-down model of charity".¹ They contrast their "horizontal mutual aid" with "dehumanizing and colonizing charity".¹

- **Community Autonomy:** DMMA believes that communities are largely excluded from state social services but intensely surveilled. They assert that "Capitalism is fundamentally unable to meet people's needs" and aim to "build self-sustaining communities that are independent of the capitalist state, both materially and ideologically, and can resist its repression".¹
- **Police and Prison Abolition:** A core tenet is that "Abolition and the mutual aid that we practice are inextricably linked." DMMA does not rely on capitalist institutions or the police, instead focusing on "building strong and resilient communities which make police obsolete, including community systems of accountability and crisis intervention".¹
- **Raising Political Consciousness:** DMMA sees political education as vital, connecting people's lived experiences to broader political perspectives and ensuring basic needs are met, recognizing the difficulty of organizing for future liberation amidst daily struggle.¹
- **Open Disagreements:** They foster a culture of open discussion and respect, believing that ideological differences are resolved through working towards common aims and engaging in a "comradely manner".¹

DMMA's explicit "Points of Unity" provide a clear, actionable ideological framework that goes beyond mere service provision, integrating radical political goals (abolition, anti-capitalism) directly into mutual aid.¹ This is a crucial distinction from more benign forms of community service, demonstrating how mutual aid can be a tool of "revolution".¹ DMMA offers a model for radical mutual aid, not just any mutual aid, implying that for Bear Creek, their efforts can and should be explicitly linked to broader goals of systemic change, not just symptom alleviation.

Alignment with Quaker Values and Local Application

The principles and projects of Des Moines Mutual Aid align significantly with Quaker testimonies, despite DMMA being a secular organization.¹ This demonstrates that the pursuit of justice can converge across seemingly disparate groups, offering a path for Quakers to engage in broader, interfaith and inter-movement solidarity.

| DMMA Point of Unity | Description | Quaker Alignment/Resonance | Potential Challenge/Nuance for Quakers |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Solidarity, Not Charity | Working shoulder to shoulder with oppressed communities for collective liberation, rejecting top-down, dehumanizing charity. | Strong resonance with "that of God in everyone," equality testimony, and the call to "seek to lead others to Truth through love." Aligns with the non-hierarchical "priesthood of all believers". ¹ | May challenge traditional Quaker charitable impulses that do not explicitly reject hierarchical dynamics. ¹ |
| Community Autonomy | Building self-sustaining communities independent of the capitalist state, which is seen as fundamentally unable to meet needs. | Aligns with simplicity (focus on essentials), community testimony, and historical Quaker self-sufficiency. Resonates with critiques of capitalism. ¹ | Challenges reliance on existing state social services and comfortable engagement with capitalist systems. Requires a radical shift in economic perspective. ¹ |
| Police and Prison Abolition | Mutual aid is inextricably linked to abolition, building resilient communities that make police obsolete through community accountability. | Deep resonance with peace testimony (non-violence extending to systemic violence), integrity, and the pursuit of Beloved Community (dismantling militarism/racism). Jeff Kisling's "Quakers for | Pushes the boundaries of traditional Quaker pacifism beyond non-participation in war to active dismantling of the carceral state. May be seen as too radical or confrontational by |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| | | Abolition Network [”] directly aligns. ¹ | some Friends. ¹ |
| Raising Political Consciousness | Connecting lived experiences to broader political perspectives and ensuring basic needs are met to enable organizing for liberation. | Aligns with seeking truth, integrity (truthfulness bringing faith and action together), and the historical Quaker prophetic witness. Emphasizes the importance of understanding systemic roots of suffering. ¹ | Requires Friends to engage more deeply with critical political analysis and uncomfortable truths about systemic oppression. ¹ |
| Open Disagreements | Resolving ideological differences through working towards common aims, comradely engagement, and mutual respect. | Strong resonance with Quaker business method (seeking loving unity), community testimony, and the practice of listening with an open spirit. ¹ | May challenge Friends who prefer to avoid overt conflict or ideological debate within meetings. ¹ |

This detailed mapping shows that the core values driving DMMA's actions are deeply compatible with Quaker testimonies, even if the language or specific tactics differ.¹ It highlights a shared moral compass and vision for a just world. This implies that Quakers can learn from and partner with secular mutual aid groups like DMMA without compromising their faith, providing a practical pathway for inter-movement solidarity where faith-based communities can contribute to and learn from broader social justice movements, enriching both. This also addresses the challenge of internal disagreements by showing how common aims can bridge ideological differences.¹

Navigating the Path: Challenges and Opportunities for Integration

This section frankly addresses the internal challenges Quaker communities might face in fully embracing a radical mutual aid model, transforming them into opportunities for spiritual and communal growth.

Overcoming Institutional Inertia and Accumulated Privilege

Despite Quaker principles of non-hierarchy, such as the "priesthood of all believers," actual meeting practices can develop subtle hierarchies or institutional inertia that resist radical shifts.¹ Historically, Quakerism faced internal controversies regarding authority and fixed forms, demonstrating a tension between the ideal of equality and its practical application.¹ The observation that the "close connection between work and worship" is a "missing ingredient" in modern Quaker practice suggests a comfort with existing structures that may hinder a full embrace of direct, outward-facing mutual aid.¹ This comfort can make it difficult for established Quaker institutions to adapt to the dynamic and often disruptive nature of mutual aid work.¹

A significant challenge lies in the demographic reality that "most Friends in America belong to the white middle class".¹ This position can lead to an unconscious accommodation to systems that perpetuate "white superiority" through silence or inaction.¹ Barrington Dunbar's powerful critique highlights the risk of Friends being perceived as "another group of white Americans who are deeply implicated in the social-political-legal military system".¹ Jeff Kisling's personal experience of "trouble getting Quakers interested in being involved in Mutual Aid" suggests that comfort or unfamiliarity with the radical, anti-systemic implications of mutual aid can be a significant barrier.¹ The critique that modern Quaker meetings can become "social clubs" and the difficulty in engaging Quakers in mutual aid suggest a spiritual stagnation that radical mutual aid can actively address.¹ This implies that embracing mutual aid is not just about helping others, but about revitalizing the Quaker community itself. The report frames these challenges as opportunities for internal spiritual renewal, as by confronting these internal hurdles, Quakers can deepen their spiritual practice, attract new members seeking meaningful action, and ensure the

continued vitality and relevance of their faith in the 21st century.¹

Reconciling Pacifism with Radical Action

The inherent pacifism of Quakerism can create tension when confronted with movements that employ "violent rhetoric" or direct, disruptive tactics.¹ The challenge for Friends is to define "non-violence" not as passive inaction or avoidance of conflict, but as an active, principled commitment to dismantling systems of violence through non-harmful means.¹ This may still involve direct confrontation with oppressive structures and a willingness to disrupt the status quo.¹ It requires a deep discernment of what "peace" truly means in a world riddled with structural violence, moving beyond individual acts of aggression to addressing systemic harm.¹

Dunbar's argument that Friends "condone" racial injustice "by our silence" and are "deeply implicated in the social-political-legal military system that has contributed to the violence of our times" offers a redefinition of "violence" to include systemic oppression and passive complicity.¹ This challenges the comfortable notion that pacifism simply means avoiding physical aggression.¹ For Quakers, true pacifism must extend beyond individual non-aggression to actively dismantling systems of structural violence.¹ Mutual aid, by directly challenging these systems and building alternatives, becomes an active form of non-violent resistance, even if it involves discomfort, confrontation with powerful institutions, and a willingness to disrupt the status quo.¹ The redefinition of Quaker pacifism to include active dismantling of "structural violence" is a critical conceptual shift, moving pacifism from a potentially passive stance to a radical, interventionist one, aligning it directly with the anti-systemic nature of mutual aid.¹ This empowers Quakers to engage with movements that might seem "radical" by demonstrating how such engagement is, in fact, a deeply principled and non-violent act of resistance, transforming "peace" from an absence of conflict to the active presence of justice.

Conclusion: A Spiritual Imperative for Transformative Justice

The comprehensive analysis unequivocally demonstrates that mutual aid is not merely a supplementary social service but a radical alternative for justice work deeply aligned with the core tenets of Quakerism.¹ Distinct from traditional charity, mutual aid operates on principles of direct action, cooperation, and solidarity, fostering horizontal relationships and community autonomy.¹ This approach directly challenges systemic injustices and works towards building resilient, self-sustaining communities.¹

The historical and philosophical underpinnings of Quakerism—particularly the belief in "that of God in everyone," the practice of Spirit-led action, non-hierarchical structures, and the pursuit of the Beloved Community—find profound resonance in the mutual aid model.¹ This alignment suggests that embracing mutual aid is not a departure from Quaker identity but a powerful return to its revolutionary origins, where early Friends extended their worship into the world to create a new society.¹

While challenges exist, such as overcoming institutional inertia, confronting accumulated privilege, and shifting from incremental change to direct, participatory action, these obstacles present opportunities for spiritual renewal and a more authentic living out of Quaker testimonies.¹ The implicit violence of inaction and complicity in oppressive systems demands that Quaker pacifism evolve to actively dismantle structural violence, making mutual aid a vital form of non-violent resistance.¹

Practical steps for Quaker meetings, such as identifying local needs, initiating participatory projects focused on survival, and fostering solidarity, can be effectively implemented by leveraging existing Quaker strengths like the "Mutual Care" advice and the Quaker business method.¹ The example of Des Moines Mutual Aid provides a concrete blueprint for how a community-led, abolitionist approach can effectively address immediate needs while simultaneously building resilient, self-sustaining communities that embody the vision of the Beloved Community.¹

Ultimately, for contemporary Quakers, embracing mutual aid is a spiritual imperative.¹ It offers a tangible path to embody the testimonies of Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Stewardship (SPICES) in a world grappling with profound injustices.¹ By engaging in direct, transformative action, Quaker communities can deepen their spiritual practice, revitalize their communal life, and provide a compelling witness to the possibility of a more just and liberated future, here and now.¹

Earlham & Bear Creek Friends: A Call to Mutual Aid!

Building Community, Building Together

In a world where systems often fail us, our strength lies in each other. Mutual Aid is about neighbors helping neighbors, sharing resources, and building a stronger, more resilient community, right here in Earlham!

It's more than charity – it's about **solidarity, shared power, and collective liberation.**

Building on Our Shared History

For generations, the spirit of mutual support has thrived in our community. Bear Creek Friends Meeting has a long tradition of "Mutual Care," where everyone is both a giver and a receiver. Now, we're coming together to extend that spirit outwards, building on a proud tradition of collective care to meet the needs of all our neighbors.

What is Mutual Aid?

Mutual aid is direct action where we collectively address our needs. It's about:

- **Working together as equals:** No top-down giving, just shared responsibility.
- **Meeting real needs:** Food, housing, skills, and support, directly from us to us.
- **Building a stronger future:** Creating resilient communities independent of failing systems.

What We'll Do, Together:

We're exploring projects tailored to Earlham's needs, such as:

- **Community Food Hub/Garden:** Growing and sharing fresh, healthy food.
- **Neighbor Support Network:** Connecting those with needs to those with resources (skills, time, tools).
- **Skill-Sharing Workshops:** Learning practical skills from each other (e.g., home repair, gardening, digital literacy).
- **Environmental Care Initiatives:** Working together to protect our local land and water.

Join Us! All Are Welcome

Whether you have a skill to share, a need to express, or simply a willingness to connect, your presence is valuable. We believe in the inherent worth and wisdom in everyone, and we want your voice to help shape our collective future.

Come learn more and help us build a stronger Earlham!

Initial Gathering:

Date:

Time:

Location: Bear Creek Friends Meetinghouse
16193 Bear Creek Rd., Earlham, IA 50072

Contact: [Insert Contact Information Here - e.g., Email or Phone]

Let's build a future of justice, equality, and freedom, right here, right now.

Works cited

1. Quaker Tent Solidarity_ Mutual Aid_.pdf