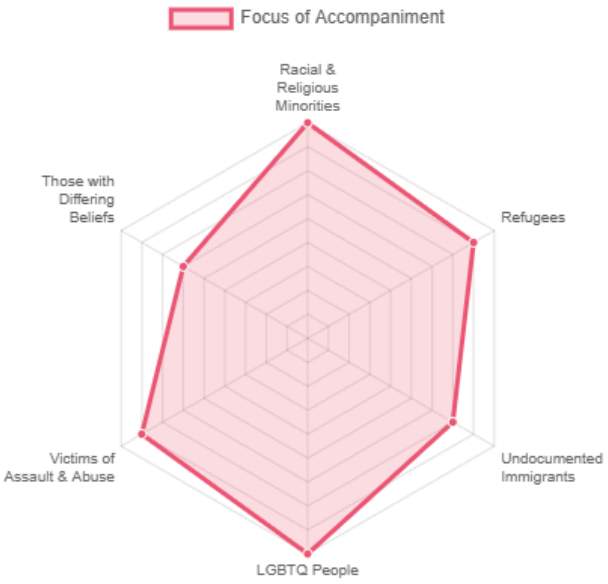
The Enduring Call: Persuading Quakers to Re-Embrace Rural Living and Mutual Aid

The Spirit of Accompaniment: Modern Mutual Aid

Giving Voice to the Voiceless

At their 2019 annual sessions, Young Friends of the IYMC centered on the theme "Accompaniment and Giving Voice." They defined accompaniment as "listening, and being there for those in need of care," extending this solidarity to a wide range of marginalized groups. This demonstrates a modern, expansive understanding of mutual aid that prioritizes presence, empathy, and advocacy in a polarized world.



Executive Summary

This report presents a compelling case for the Religious Society of Friends, particularly the Bear Creek Friends Meeting, to consciously return to rural ways of living and an economy centered on mutual aid. Drawing upon deep Quaker theological principles and rich historical precedents, this analysis meticulously distinguishes mutual aid from traditional charity, arguing that the former represents a more authentic and transformative expression of Quaker values. By re-embracing a lifestyle of collective care, reciprocal support, and shared responsibility, Quakers can not only deepen their spiritual practice and live out their testimonies more fully but also build resilient, just communities that actively address contemporary societal challenges like isolation, inequality, and systemic failures. **This reorientation is presented not as a departure from heritage but as a vital return to the revolutionary origins of Quakerism, offering a powerful model for collective flourishing in the modern world.**

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THE ENDURING CALL

A Return to Rural Living & Mutual Aid

This is a call for the Religious Society of Friends to re-embrace a foundational truth: that our spiritual principles are most authentically lived through collective care and shared responsibility. By returning to a lifestyle of mutual aid, we can build resilient communities and actively address today's greatest challenges.

Solidarity, Not Charity

Understanding the fundamental difference between mutual aid and charity is the first step. One builds power collectively, while the other can reinforce inequality.

Charity: The Top-Down Model

Givers (with power & resources)

↓

Receivers (defined by "need")

This creates a one-way flow, establishing a hierarchy. It provides temporary relief for symptoms but does not address the root causes of systemic problems and can create dependency.

Mutual Aid: The Solidarity Model

People Supporting Each Other

Collective Problem Solving

Shared Resources & Skills

Building New Social Relations

This creates a web of reciprocal support. It's a horizontal, cooperative effort to meet survival needs while building a shared understanding of, and resistance to, systemic injustice.

A Moral & Theological Imperative

The Quaker testimonies, known as SPICES, are not abstract ideals. They are a spiritual framework that finds its most complete expression in the practice of mutual aid.

Simplicity

Focusing on essentials encourages equitable resource distribution and discourages the accumulation that creates inequality.

Peace

Building a world that supports everyone by challenging systemic violence (poverty, racism) through active, non-violent resistance.

Integrity

Aligning our actions with our belief in equality. Mutual aid builds the trust needed for genuine shared responsibility.

Community

Recognizing our interconnectedness. Everyone is both a giver and a receiver in a caring "family" that addresses systemic issues together.

Equality

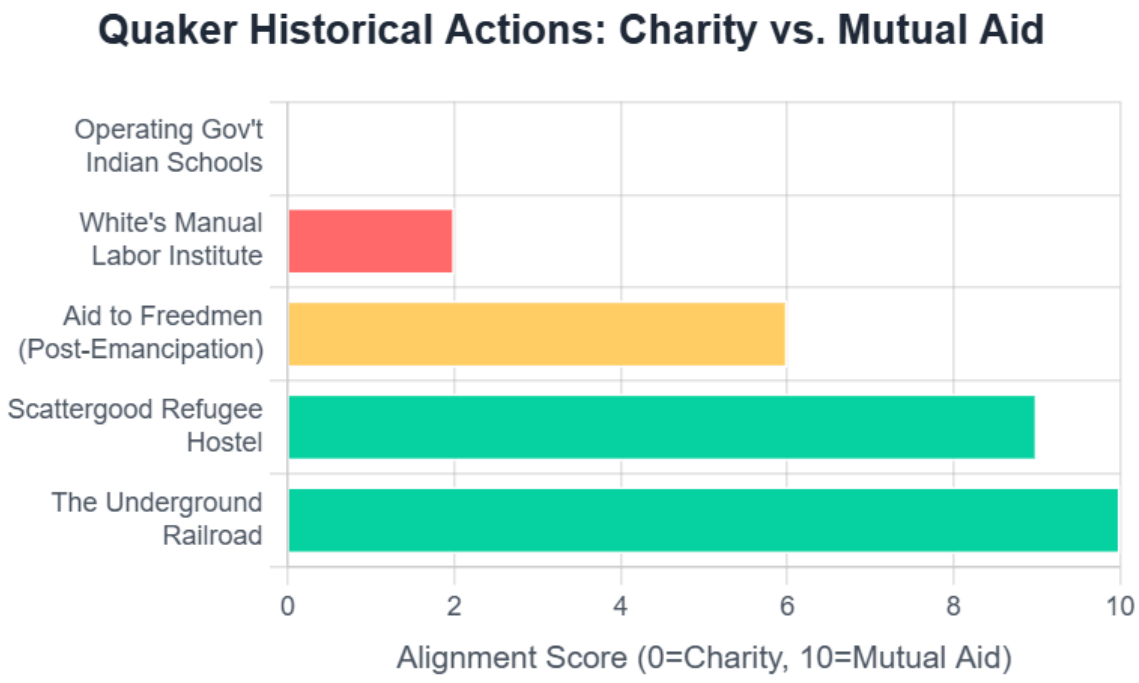
Honoring "that of God in everyone." Mutual aid's horizontal structure respects the dignity and agency of all, dismantling hierarchies.

Stewardship

Responsibly sharing our collective resources—time, skills, and wealth—for the good of all, not just for private gain.

A Legacy of Action: Lessons from History

Quaker history contains powerful examples of true mutual aid and cautionary tales of charity. The method of aid delivery is as important as the intent.



This chart scores historical Quaker actions based on their alignment with mutual aid principles (reciprocity, solidarity, shared power). High scores represent genuine mutual aid, while low scores indicate a top-down, charitable, or even harmful approach.

The Earlham Context: Rural Resilience

In rural settings like Earlham, Iowa, mutual aid wasn't an abstract idea—it was a necessity for survival and a cornerstone of community life, a tradition that continues today.

Agricultural Roots

"Threshing rings" and "barn raisings" where families pooled labor, and farming cooperatives that gave producers collective power, were the lifeblood of the early rural economy.

Collective Crisis Response

From rebuilding after fires in 1901 to neighbors helping neighbors during the devastating 1993 floods, the community has always come together to overcome adversity.

Modern Expressions

Groups like "Chicks With Checks" pool funds for local projects, and community-wide efforts to revitalize the downtown show that the spirit of proactive mutual aid is thriving.

How to Get Started

Building a mutual aid network starts with simple, concrete steps that anyone can join. It's about connecting needs with offers and building relationships along the way.

1. **Listen & Learn**
   Attend community gatherings and listening sessions to understand real-time needs directly from neighbors.
2. **Map Resources**
   Create a "needs and offers" board (physical or digital) where people can share what they can give and what they require.
3. **Start Small**
   Launch a pilot project like a tool library, a community food pantry, or a skill-sharing workshop based on identified needs.
4. **Build Solidarity**
   Focus on building relationships. Mutual aid is as much about community connection as it is about sharing resources.

The Path Forward: A Blueprint for Action

Embracing mutual aid is both a spiritual renewal and a practical strategy. It requires overcoming internal challenges to build a more just and resilient future.

Challenges to Overcome

Institutional Inertia

Comfort with existing structures can hinder adaptation to dynamic, grassroots action.

Accumulated Privilege

Unconscious accommodation to unjust systems through silence or inaction.

Steps for Renewal

Deepen Understanding

Study the theory and history of mutual aid, leveraging Quaker decision-making processes.

Foster Engagement

Create resource-sharing networks (skills, time, goods) and support existing local efforts.

Build Partnerships

Collaborate with and learn from contemporary mutual aid groups to amplify impact.

1. Introduction: The Call to Re-Embrace Rural Mutual Aid

1.1. Setting the Context: Quakers, Community, and the Modern World

The Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers, is a faith community deeply rooted in the direct experience of the Divine, which compels them to live out their beliefs through practical action and a profound commitment to social justice.[1] In an era marked by pervasive inequality, increasing social isolation, and persistent systemic failures, the foundational principles and historical practices of Quakerism offer a timeless and highly relevant model for fostering true community and advancing social justice.[1] The call for Quakers to "return to the rural ways of living and economy" suggests a deliberate re-engagement with a lifestyle historically conducive to deep community bonds and interdependence.

The emphasis on a "return to rural ways" transcends mere geographical preference; it implies a profound philosophical shift. Early Quaker settlements in Iowa, for instance, were driven by a desire to establish communities aligned with their core values.[1] Rural life, by its very nature, has historically necessitated closer community ties and interdependence, as evidenced by practices such as threshing rings and barn raisings in communities like Earlham.[1] This stands in contrast to many aspects of modern society, particularly in urbanized settings, which can inadvertently foster individualism and detachment, contributing to widespread isolation.[1] The re-engagement with rural ways, therefore, is not simply a relocation but a conscious embrace of an environment and lifestyle that inherently supports and sustains genuine mutual aid. The physical proximity and shared practical needs inherent in rural living naturally encourage collective effort and reciprocal support, making mutual aid a more organic and sustainable practice that can actively counteract the atomizing effects often observed in contemporary life.

1.2. The Urgency of Mutual Aid in Contemporary Society

Mutual aid is fundamentally defined as a practice where individuals and groups come together directly to meet each other's needs, rooted in the understanding that conventional systems often fall short.[1] Its core principles include direct action, cooperation, mutual understanding, and solidarity.[1] This approach is not new, possessing deep historical roots [1], and has gained renewed critical importance during crises such as pandemics, climate disasters, and periods of heightened inequality, where existing systems frequently prove inadequate.[1] Beyond crisis response, mutual aid is crucial for addressing the "daily crises of our lives in an unjust society".[1]

The contemporary urgency of mutual aid stems from its inherent critique of existing societal structures. Mutual aid is explicitly rooted in the understanding that "existing societal systems often fall short in providing adequate support for all" and that "the systems we live in are not meeting our needs".[1] It frequently emerges as a community-led response when governmental safety nets and conventional systems prove insufficient or when systemic oppression is at play.[1] This emphasis on systemic failure means that engaging in mutual aid transcends a simple act of benevolence. Instead, it becomes a fundamental critique of, and an active resistance against, the inadequacies and injustices of the status quo. This elevates mutual aid from a temporary fix to a transformative, systemic approach, aligning profoundly with Quakerism's historical prophetic witness against oppression and its commitment to social justice.

2. Defining Mutual Aid: A Quaker Perspective Beyond Charity

2.1. Conceptual Framework: Mutual Aid vs. Traditional Charity

A clear conceptual framework is essential for understanding why mutual aid aligns so profoundly with Quaker principles. Mutual aid is a grassroots, reciprocal, and horizontal approach where individuals and communities collaboratively share resources to meet shared needs.[1] This model operates on the principle that everyone possesses needs that should be met, and simultaneously, everyone has something valuable to offer to help meet the needs of others, thereby activating all participants as part of the solution.[1] Resources are shared unconditionally, a key differentiator from charity, which often imposes conditions such as means testing or grant stipulations.[1]

This approach stands in stark contrast to traditional charity, which is typically characterized as a top-down and unidirectional provision of assistance, resources, or services from individuals or organizations to those deemed "in need".[1] Charity often creates a hierarchical relationship between the giver and the receiver, potentially reinforcing power imbalances and fostering dependency rather than empowerment.[1]

The concept of mutual aid has deep historical roots, explored extensively by the Russian thinker Peter Kropotkin in his 1902 book, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Kropotkin argued that cooperation is a vital force that helps societies thrive, challenging the prevailing notion of competition as the sole driver of evolution.[1] In contemporary understanding, Dean Spade, a prominent trans activist, identifies key facets of mutual aid: it addresses survival needs while simultaneously building an understanding of the root causes of inequity; it functions as a mobilization tactic for building solidarity around movements for political and social transformation; and it is organized through direct participation and collective action.[1] This framework highlights mutual aid as "survival work" practiced in conjunction with broader social change movements.[1]

For Quakers, the distinction between mutual aid and charity carries profound moral weight. Mutual aid's emphasis on "horizontal, reciprocal relationships" and "collective care," treating all participants as equals, directly aligns with foundational Quaker principles.[1] Quakerism is rooted in the belief in "that of God in every person" and a historical rejection of social hierarchies, exemplified by their refusal to use honorifics.[1]

Therefore, embracing mutual aid's horizontal structure is not merely a practical choice for effective service delivery; it is a profound moral imperative. It directly embodies the Quaker testimony of Equality and the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, ensuring that aid is delivered in a way that respects agency and avoids inadvertently perpetuating systems of power and dependency that contradict their spiritual convictions. Choosing charity, even with good intentions, risks undermining these foundational principles by creating or reinforcing dynamics that are antithetical to the Quaker understanding of human dignity and equality.

3. The Moral and Theological Imperative: Quaker Principles and Mutual Aid

3.1. "That of God in Everyone": The Foundation for Reciprocal Care

A foundational belief within the Religious Society of Friends is the concept of "That of God" in all persons, experienced as the Inner Light, the Holy Spirit, or the Divine Center within every individual.[1] This presence enables intimate communion with God without intermediaries, guiding and inspiring Friends through prayer.[1] This belief in the inherent divine spark within each person provides a profound ethical basis for non-violence and equality.[1]

The recognition of the divine in each person necessitates treating all individuals as equals in a shared struggle for liberation.[1] This concept is not merely an abstract theological belief but a direct impetus for mutual aid, transforming abstract faith into tangible, egalitarian action. If every person possesses "that of God" within them, then no one is inherently superior or inferior in their capacity to give or receive. This directly challenges the hierarchical nature of charity, where one party is positioned as a benevolent provider and the other as a passive recipient. Therefore, **for Quakers, mutual aid's horizontal structure is not merely a practical choice; it is a theological imperative, a direct manifestation of their deepest spiritual conviction. It honors the divine spark in everyone, enabling all to be both givers and receivers, thereby transforming mutual aid into a matter of faith integrity.**

3.2. Spirit-Led Action and Non-Hierarchical Structures: Embodying Quaker Testimonies

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 beliefs are not merely abstract theological concepts but are expressed through practical, action-oriented "testimonies," often summarized by the acronym SPICES: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Stewardship.[1] These testimonies are "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.

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. The internal practices of unprogrammed worship and consensus-based business meetings are themselves forms of mutual aid, demonstrating that the organizational framework for external mutual aid already exists within Quakerism. This means Quakers do not need to invent new organizational structures for mutual aid; they can extend their existing, deeply ingrained spiritual and decision-making practices outwards. This makes the transition to mutual aid less about adopting a foreign concept and more about applying their core identity to the world, making it a natural and authentic expression of their faith.

3.3. 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. For Quakers, who have a long history of prophetic witness and social justice, mutual aid becomes a concrete, Spirit-led path to actively build the Beloved Community, moving beyond abstract ideals or mere advocacy to tangible, transformative work that dismantles oppressive structures. This tangible witness can attract new members who are seeking meaningful action and a community that actively lives its values, ensuring the continued vitality and relevance of Quakerism in contemporary society.

Table 2: Quaker Testimonies and Their Connection to Mutual Aid

Testimony	Core Principle	Connection to Mutual Aid
Simplicity	Living with clarity and purpose, focusing on essentials.[1]	Promotes equitable resource distribution, fostering solidarity and sharing by discouraging excess.[1]
Peace	Nurturing harmonious relationships based on mutual respect and caring for all.[1]	Informs holistic well-being and reconciliation, contributing to a world that supports everyone.[1]
Integrity	Honesty and consistency between values and actions.[1]	Builds trust and credibility, encouraging shared responsibility and reinforcing communal bonds in aid efforts.[1]
Community	Belief in collective action and the "broader human family".[1]	Recognizes that individuals achieve more together; inspires addressing systemic issues and viewing the meeting as a caring "family" where all are givers and receivers.[1]
Equality/Equity	Inherent worth and dignity of all people.[1]	Drives efforts for justice, equality, and human rights; aims to uplift and support everyone, particularly the marginalized, and challenge oppression.[1]
Stewardship	Responsible management of material possessions and wealth for the greater good.[1]	Encourages wise use of resources and generous sharing, leading to the redistribution of wealth and skills.[1]

4. Historical Roots of Rural Mutual Aid: Lessons from Iowa Quakers and Earlham Community

4.1. Quaker Communities: Internal Care and Outward Witness

The Religious Society of Friends has a long and rich history of communal care, evolving from internal support to broad social action. Early Quaker communities functioned akin to a "large extended family," providing holistic care for their members, including financial assistance, childcare, elder care, and support during illness.[1] The "Meeting for Sufferings," established in Britain around 1675, served as an early formalized example of Quaker mutual aid, providing relief for Friends suffering from persecution and publicizing injustices.[1] This internal cohesion provided a strong base for mutual support and the development of shared resources, demonstrating an initial focus on internal care for members.[1]

This robust internal foundation served as a springboard for significant external impact. A prime example of high-stakes, direct mutual aid driven by solidarity is the Quakers' significant role in the Underground Railroad. Iowa Friends actively aided escaped slaves, providing material support and safe passage, demonstrating a clear progression from meeting the needs of their own members to extending direct aid to marginalized populations.[1] This was a collaborative effort to dismantle a systemic injustice, where freedom seekers were active agents in their own liberation, and Quakers acted as allies and facilitators.[1] Similarly, the Scattergood Hostel, a Quaker initiative that operated from 1939 to 1943, served as a haven for 186 European refugees fleeing the Nazis.[1] During this time, refugees and volunteers worked communally to operate the facility, with guests actively contributing labor and skills. This communal effort exemplified reciprocal mutual aid, where resources and efforts were pooled, and participants were both givers and receivers in a shared struggle for survival and resettlement.[1] The evolution from internal care to outward social action demonstrates that a strong, self-sustaining community built on internal mutual aid can develop the capacity and moral imperative for broader societal impact, embodying the concept of "conservative roots leading to progressive fruits."

4.2. Cautionary Tales: When Benevolence Falls Short

While Quaker history is replete with acts of compassion, a critical examination reveals instances where benevolent intent, when devoid of genuine reciprocity and respect for self-determination, led to outcomes more aligned with problematic charity than true mutual aid. Quaker involvement in Indian Affairs, for example, despite being framed with a "sense of justice" and a desire to "not countenance the trend of government to exterminate the Indian race," was deeply problematic and often veered into paternalism.[1] Quakers were instrumental in conceptualizing and carrying out cultural assimilation and Indian education policies, including the operation of Indian boarding schools where children were forcibly removed from their families and punished for speaking Native languages.[1] This approach, despite stated benevolent intentions, was inherently top-down, imposed conditions, and aimed at transforming recipients to fit a dominant cultural norm, causing "lasting damage".[1]

Similarly, initiatives like White's Iowa Manual Labor Institute (established in 1856) and aid to freedmen post-Emancipation, while compassionate and vital, largely exhibited characteristics of charity.[1] White's Institute, funded by a bequest, provided top-down services for "poor children," focusing on "rescuing" and "fitting" them for life, implying a benefactor-beneficiary relationship rather than reciprocal exchange.[1] Aid to freedmen involved the provision of money, possessions, and teachers from Quakers to a recipient group, primarily focused on alleviating immediate needs.[1] While empowering, the structure appears to have been unidirectional, lacking the explicit reciprocal, co-creative nature of mutual aid.[1] These examples serve as a vital moral lesson: benevolent intent alone is insufficient. The

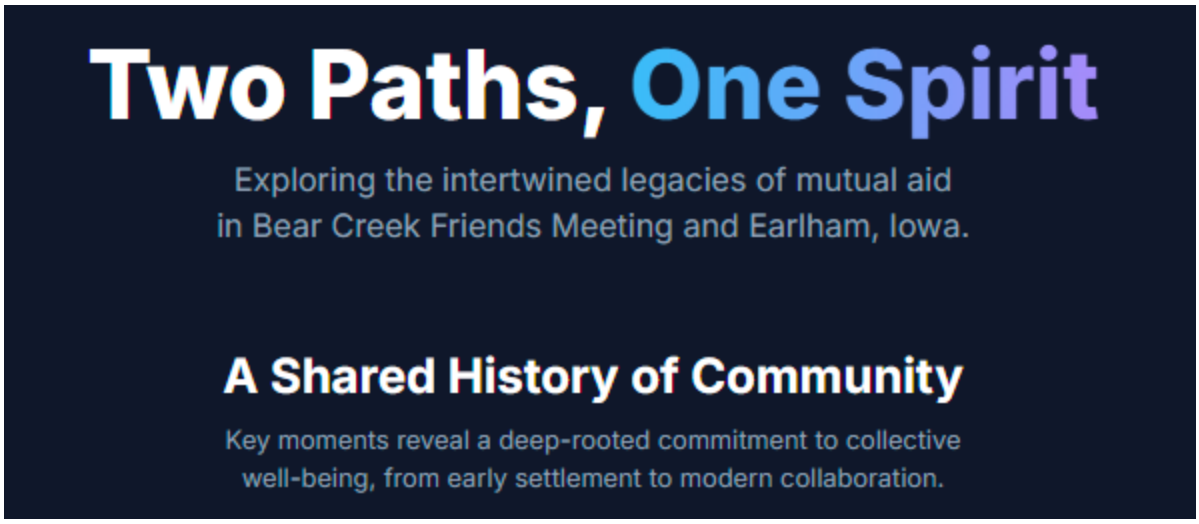
method of aid delivery is crucial to avoid paternalism and harm. True mutual aid demands constant self-reflection, active listening to marginalized communities, and a commitment to genuine solidarity that prioritizes the agency and leadership of those being "helped," thereby avoiding the pitfalls of "white saviorism."

Table 3: Historical Quaker Actions: Alignment with Mutual Aid Principles

Action	Alignment with Mutual Aid Principles (Score 0-10)	Explanation of Alignment
Underground Railroad	10	A high-stakes, direct collaboration between Quakers and freedom seekers, built on shared risk and solidarity to dismantle systemic injustice. Freedom seekers were active agents in their own liberation, and Quakers were allies and facilitators.[1]
Scattergood Refugee Hostel	9	Refugees were active contributors of labor and skills alongside volunteers, creating a communal effort for survival and resettlement. This embodied reciprocity and collective responsibility, where guests were both givers and receivers.[1]
Aid to Freedmen (Post-Emancipation)	6	While vital and compassionate, this was largely a one-way provision of resources (money, teachers) from Quakers to freed people. It aimed to empower but lacked the explicit reciprocal, co-creative structure of mutual aid.[1]
White's Manual Labor Institute	2	A top-down, institutional charity funded by a bequest, providing services for "poor children." It established a clear benefactor-beneficiary relationship, focusing on "rescuing" and "fitting" children rather than

		empowering them through reciprocal exchange.[1]
Operating Gov't Indian Schools	0	Despite benevolent framing, this was a deeply harmful, imposed charity that lacked reciprocity and self-determination. It aimed at cultural assimilation, forcibly removing children and suppressing Native cultures, representing a top-down, paternalistic approach.[1]

4.3. The Earlham Context: Collective Resilience in Rural Life



The history of rural Iowa, including communities like Earlham, is rich with examples of mutual aid, demonstrating how collective action was not just a response to hardship but a fundamental aspect of daily life and economic survival. Earlham's founding itself, in 1870, was shaped by David Hockett's civic-minded act of deeding land for railroad development and selling acreage for town development, an early form of "civic mutual aid" laying the groundwork for collective prosperity.[1] The town's commitment to collective well-being was further evidenced by the construction of its first public school around 1872, a collective investment in public education.[1]

Historically, agricultural life in rural Iowa necessitated collective labor. Practices such as "threshing rings," where farm families pooled labor to harvest grain, and "barn raisings," where neighbors collectively constructed barns, were common. Farmers also formed cooperatives to jointly purchase and operate expensive machinery, ensuring essential tasks could be completed efficiently across the community.[1] These practices illustrate how shared self-interest and the need for collective effort in a labor-intensive agricultural economy fostered strong bonds of mutual support. Beyond informal labor exchanges, formal agricultural cooperatives emerged as a powerful form of mutual aid, empowering farmers to reduce dependence on middlemen and secure better prices.[1] Churches and Ladies Aid Societies also played a vital role in community welfare, providing social outlets, support for families, and even sickness and burial insurance.[1]

Rural communities like Earlham also demonstrated remarkable collective resilience in the face of adversity. The 1901 fire, which devastated parts of downtown Earlham, prompted a collective response that led to new masonry building ordinances, institutionalizing protective measures for the entire community.[1] During the Great Depression, farmers organized the "Farm Holiday movement" to collectively resist economic exploitation, and local communities improvised solutions like issuing "scrip money".[1] The devastating 1993 floods in Iowa elicited an extraordinary community response, characterized by neighbors helping neighbors and "unselfish giving".[1] These examples demonstrate that mutual aid was not just a choice in rural settings but a necessity for economic survival and community resilience. This historical integration of mutual aid into the fabric of rural life provides a strong precedent for the "return to rural ways," indicating that this lifestyle is inherently suited to and historically embedded in such a context.

4.4. Modern Expressions of Community Mutual Aid in Earlham

Earlham continues to demonstrate a vibrant culture of mutual aid, adapting historical principles of cooperation to address contemporary challenges and pursue new opportunities. A prominent example is "Chicks With Checks," a grassroots philanthropy group of women who collectively contribute and vote on local projects to fund, ranging from practical needs like a diaper changing station to recreational amenities like a public skating rink.[1] This model exemplifies direct, collective resource pooling and democratic decision-making, embodying the non-hierarchical spirit of mutual aid.[1]

The ongoing downtown revitalization, including the rehabilitation of the historic Bricker-Price Block into a social hub, showcases a blend of private philanthropy and extensive public engagement.[1] This collective investment aims not only to boost the local economy but also to create shared spaces that enhance community cohesion and quality of life.[1] The Earlham Community School District also functions as a central hub for mutual investment in human capital and local economic development, actively seeking employer partners for its internship program.[1] The revival of the local newspaper, the

Earlham Echo, further serves as a modern expression of community solidarity, fostering a shared sense of identity and facilitating communication essential for nurturing mutual aid.[1]

Modern Earlham demonstrates that mutual aid can evolve beyond basic survival to proactive community development and quality-of-life enhancement. These initiatives are not solely about coping with hardship but about flourishing and improving the community as a whole. This indicates a shift in the perceived role of mutual aid from a reactive coping mechanism to a proactive community development strategy. This broader understanding positions mutual aid not just as a solution for the vulnerable, but as a robust framework for all community members to collectively build a better future, thereby broadening its appeal and sustainability.

Table 4: Comparative Aspects of Mutual Aid: Bear Creek Friends Meeting vs. Earlham, Iowa (Town)

Aspect	Bear Creek Friends Meeting	Earlham, Iowa (Town)
Primary Driver	Faith-driven (Inner Light, equality, testimonies) [1]	Civic-mindedness, practical needs, community development [1]
Scope of Aid	Holistic, life-cycle care for members (extended family model); principled social justice for wider society [1]	Community-wide public good; crisis response; economic and social revitalization [1]
Key Historical Examples	Underground Railroad, internal financial/familial support, abolitionism [1]	David Hockett's land deeds, 1901 fire response, public school construction [1]
Organizational Structure	Meeting system (Preparative, Monthly, Yearly Meetings); emphasis on spiritual guidance, lay leadership [1]	Civic government, historical societies, grassroots philanthropic groups, business initiatives [1]
Modern Manifestations	Continued worship, community outreach, shared pastorates with other Friends Meetings [1]	Bricker-Price Block rehabilitation, "Chicks With Checks," local business revitalization [1]
Core Values	Equality, peace, simplicity, integrity, communal responsibility [1]	Resilience, collective action, civic pride, economic growth, public welfare [1]

5. Persuasive Arguments for a Return to Rural Mutual Aid

5.1. Spiritual Deepening and Authentic Living: Aligning Practice with Principle

Embracing a return to rural ways of living and an economy centered on mutual aid offers Quakers a profound path to spiritual deepening and authentic living. The engagement in radical mutual aid compels Friends to confront internal hurdles that may have developed over time, such as institutional inertia and the subtle accommodations that can arise from accumulated privilege.[1] Historically, Quakerism has faced internal controversies regarding authority and fixed forms, reflecting a tension between the ideal of equality and its practical application.[1] The observation that the "close connection between work and worship" may be a "missing ingredient" in modern Quaker practice suggests a comfort with existing structures that can hinder a full embrace of direct, outward-facing mutual aid.[1] This comfort can make it challenging for established Quaker institutions to adapt to the dynamic and often disruptive nature of mutual aid work.

A significant challenge also lies in the demographic reality that "most Friends in America belong to the white middle class," a position that can lead to unconscious accommodation to systems that perpetuate "white superiority" through silence or inaction.[1] The critique that modern Quaker meetings can become "social clubs" and the difficulty in engaging Friends in mutual aid suggests a spiritual stagnation that radical mutual aid can actively address.[1] These challenges are not merely obstacles but symptoms of a potential spiritual stagnation. Embracing radical mutual aid forces Quakers to confront these internal hurdles, pushing them beyond comfort zones and into active, Spirit-led engagement with systemic injustice. This confrontation can lead to deeper spiritual practice, attract new members seeking meaningful action, and ensure the vitality and relevance of their faith in the 21st century. This frames the integration of mutual aid not just as a service to others, but as a necessary internal transformation for the Quaker community itself, motivating members to overcome resistance by appealing to their desire for spiritual authenticity and communal vitality.

5.2. Building Resilient and Just Communities: A Model for Collective Flourishing

Mutual aid fosters long-term resilience, self-reliance, and builds stronger, more connected communities.[1] By actively building alternative systems through mutual aid, Quakers demonstrate a "lived experience" of the Beloved Community, providing a powerful model for collective flourishing.[1] This practical demonstration is highly persuasive, not only for potential new members but also for the wider society seeking viable alternatives to failing systems.

The vision of the Beloved Community is not a passive, utopian ideal but an actionable vision that demands active commitment to nonviolence and the dismantling of systemic injustices.[1] Mutual aid directly confronts these systemic barriers by providing direct support and building alternative structures.[1] For Quakers, this means mutual aid is not just about advocating for justice; it is about

living it and *building* it through direct action. This transforms their faith into a lived experience of an alternative, just society. This embodiment of their values through tangible action can attract individuals who are seeking a community that actively lives its principles, thereby ensuring the continued vitality and relevance of Quakerism in contemporary society.

5.3. Addressing Contemporary Crises through Collective Action

Mutual aid offers a practical, community-led solution to complex modern challenges that traditional systems often fail to address. It directly confronts issues such as social isolation, pervasive inequality, and systemic failures.[1] The urgency of mutual aid is particularly evident during contemporary crises, including pandemics, climate disasters, and periods of heightened inequality, where existing systems frequently prove inadequate.[1]

Young Friends within the Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) have expressed concerns about societal polarization and climate change, alongside their hopes for technology and speaking "truth to power".[1] Mutual aid provides a concrete mechanism to address these pressing issues. By engaging in mutual aid, Quakers can directly respond to these challenges in a way that aligns with their values and offers tangible results. This positions Quakers as agents of practical, relevant change, demonstrating that their faith is not an antiquated belief system but a dynamic force for addressing the most critical problems of the 21st century. This active engagement ensures their faith remains relevant and impactful.

6. Challenges and Opportunities: Navigating the Path Forward

6.1. 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] The comfort within established structures can make it difficult for Quaker institutions to adapt to the dynamic and often disruptive nature of mutual aid work.[1] The demographic reality that "most Friends in America belong to the white middle class" can inadvertently lead to an unconscious accommodation to systems that perpetuate "white superiority" through silence or inaction.[1] The observation that there has been "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]

These challenges are not merely obstacles but symptoms of a potential spiritual stagnation. The critique that modern Quaker meetings can become "social clubs" implies a lack of outward, transformative engagement.[1] Embracing radical mutual aid forces Quakers to confront these internal hurdles, pushing them beyond comfort zones and into active, Spirit-led engagement with systemic injustice. This confrontation can lead to deeper spiritual practice, attract new members seeking meaningful action, and ensure the vitality and relevance of their faith in the 21st century. This frames the integration of mutual aid not just as a service to others, but as a necessary internal transformation for the Quaker community itself, motivating members to overcome resistance by appealing to their desire for spiritual authenticity and communal vitality.

6.2. Reconciling Pacifism with Radical Action for Systemic Change

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.

Barrington 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. For Quakers, true pacifism must extend beyond individual non-aggression to actively dismantling systems of structural violence. 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] This transforms "peace" from an absence of conflict to the active presence of justice. Such a redefinition empowers Quakers to engage with movements that might seem "radical" or "confrontational" by demonstrating how such engagement is, in fact, a deeply principled and non-violent act of resistance, fully aligned with their peace testimony.

7. Recommendations for Action: Cultivating a Future of Rural Mutual Aid

7.1. Deepening Theological Understanding and Internal Practice

To cultivate a future centered on rural mutual aid, Quaker communities should begin by deepening their theological understanding and internal practices. This involves organizing educational sessions and workshops that cover the theoretical underpinnings of mutual aid, drawing from thinkers like Peter Kropotkin and contemporary organizers such as Dean Spade. These sessions would clarify the critical distinctions between mutual aid and charity, challenging any ingrained philanthropic assumptions.[1] Furthermore, study groups should be facilitated to explore the Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative)'s own historical instances of mutual aid, such as its pivotal involvement in the Underground Railroad and the communal operation of the Scattergood Hostel. Analyzing these historical examples can provide inspiration, practical lessons, and a vital sense of continuity with the Yearly Meeting's heritage.[1]

Internally, the "Mutual Care" advice, which states that "Each of us is both giver and receiver, ready to help and to accept help," should be actively promoted and formalized within monthly meetings.[1] Practical steps could include establishing visible "needs and offers" boards or digital platforms where members can list what they need (e.g., help with childcare, transportation, a meal during illness) and what they can offer (e.g., a ride, a home-cooked meal, a listening ear, specific skills).[1] This formalization encourages reciprocal exchange and strengthens communal bonds. Additionally, the Quaker practice of discerning and following God's will in decision-making should be extended beyond internal governance to inform external community engagement. This involves applying the discernment process not only to identify community needs but also to collectively determine and implement responses, fostering direct participation from all involved, including those traditionally seen as "recipients".[1] Bear Creek Friends 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. This framing makes the outward mutual aid work an authentic expression of their existing faith and community structure, making it more likely to be embraced.

7.2. Fostering Grassroots Community Engagement and Resource Sharing

Quaker communities should actively foster grassroots community engagement and develop robust resource-sharing networks. This necessitates moving beyond formal surveys to engage directly with local communities to understand pressing needs and existing community strengths, fostering genuine relationships.[1] Rather than always creating new programs, Friends should seek to identify, support, and amplify existing grassroots mutual aid efforts in Iowa, potentially partnering with groups addressing food insecurity, housing justice, or harm reduction, learning from their models and contributing resources or volunteer power.[1] Recognizing that mutual aid often thrives at the hyper-local level, Quaker meetings can provide logistical support, meeting spaces, or modest financial contributions to community-led initiatives, ensuring that the aid remains horizontal and community-driven.[1]

To facilitate resource sharing, Quaker communities should explore models for a "Common Treasury," moving beyond traditional financial donations to include sharing skills, time, and material goods within and beyond the Quaker community.[1] This could involve creating a centralized inventory of skills and resources offered by members and a mechanism for matching them with needs.[1] Formalizing a skills-sharing network, where members can offer and receive practical support such as childcare, eldercare, transportation, home repair, or even legal and administrative assistance, builds resilience and reduces reliance on external, often costly, services.[1] Finally, actively fostering connections between Quaker meetings and broader community groups working on systemic issues like housing justice, food security, and harm reduction strengthens the collective capacity for social transformation.[1]

7.3. Strategic Partnerships and Learning from Contemporary Models

Strategic partnerships and a willingness to learn from contemporary mutual aid models are crucial for effective implementation. The Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) collective serves as a concrete, successful example of abolitionist mutual aid praxis, demonstrating how its principles and projects can inspire and inform Quaker efforts.[1] DMMA explicitly operates on "Points of Unity" such as "Solidarity, Not Charity," "Community Autonomy," and "Police and Prison Abolition," directly connecting its survival work to broader movements for political and social transformation.[1]

The core values driving DMMA's actions are deeply compatible with Quaker testimonies, even if the language or specific tactics differ. For example, DMMA's rejection of top-down charity and emphasis on collective liberation resonates strongly with the Quaker testimony of Equality and the belief in "that of God in everyone".[1] Their commitment to community autonomy and building self-sustaining communities aligns with Quaker simplicity and historical self-sufficiency.[1] Furthermore, DMMA's focus on police and prison abolition resonates profoundly with the Quaker peace testimony, extending non-violence to systemic violence and the pursuit of the Beloved Community.[1] This demonstrates 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, thereby enriching both. This also provides a framework for navigating internal disagreements by focusing on shared aims for systemic change.

A compelling example of bridging historical divides through practical collaboration is the shared pastorate agreement between Bear Creek Friends Church (the progressive branch) and Earlham Friends Church, which has led to numerous joint community activities, including annual picnics, concerts of prayer, and combined children's programs.[1] This active collaboration demonstrates that reconciliation and enhanced mutual aid between historically distinct entities are not merely theoretical possibilities but active, ongoing processes. This provides a strong precedent for future joint ventures, suggesting that by focusing on shared community needs and mutual benefit, both the Friends Meetings and the broader town of Earlham can actively bridge historical divides, foster a stronger, more unified community spirit, and enhance the collective well-being of the entire area.

Table 5: Des Moines Mutual Aid's "Points of Unity" and Quaker Alignment

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.[1]	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.
Community Autonomy	Building self-sustaining communities independent of the capitalist state, which is seen as fundamentally unable to meet needs.[1]	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.
Police and Prison Abolition	Mutual aid is inextricably linked to abolition, building resilient communities that make police obsolete through community accountability.[1]	Deep resonance with peace testimony (non-violence extending to systemic violence), integrity, and the pursuit of Beloved Community (dismantling militarism/racism).[1]	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 some Friends.
Raising Political Consciousness	Connecting lived experiences to broader political perspectives and	Aligns with seeking truth, integrity (truthfulness bringing faith and action	Requires Friends to engage more deeply with critical political analysis and

	ensuring basic needs are met to enable organizing for liberation.[1]	together), and the historical Quaker prophetic witness. Emphasizes the importance of understanding systemic roots of suffering.[1]	uncomfortable truths about systemic oppression.
Open Disagreements	Resolving ideological differences through working towards common aims, comradely engagement, and mutual respect.[1]	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.

8. Conclusion: A Vision for Quaker Renewal and Transformative Justice

The comprehensive analysis presented herein 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. 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] The historical narrative of Earlham, from its agricultural cooperation to modern community initiatives, further demonstrates an enduring spirit of mutual aid, highlighting how collective action has been integral to its identity and resilience.[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] The report consistently argues that embracing mutual aid is not just about external social impact but also internal spiritual revitalization for Quakers. The challenges faced are framed as opportunities for growth, suggesting a symbiotic relationship: the more authentically Quakers live out their principles through mutual aid, the more vibrant and relevant their community becomes, which in turn amplifies their external impact. This holistic benefit appeals to both the social justice motivations and the spiritual aspirations of the target audience, reinforcing that mutual aid is a path to both collective liberation and individual/communal spiritual flourishing.

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. 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]

Works cited

1. Mutual Aid: Earlham and Bear Creek