

Meetings for Learning - Resources – History and Testimonies

Alice Paul

(1885-1977)



Early Life and education

Alice Paul was born in Moorestown, New Jersey, into an American Quaker family. In her teenage years she read all the books in the Meeting House Library.

She studied Biology at Swarthmore College, a Quaker university. In her final year there she attended a new course in Political and Economic Science, given by Professor Brooks. He had studied the effects of poverty on women's prospects in life. Alice Paul loved the course, and Brooks awarded her a fellowship to New York College

Settlement. This involved living and working in the community amongst the poor, and while doing that she studied Social Work at Columbia University. She came to believe that social work would alleviate situations, but would not create fundamental change in society.

Living and learning in Birmingham

After New York, she did a Masters Degree in Economics, Sociology and Political Science with the University of Pennsylvania. She was then given a Fellowship for a year to Woodbrooke, Birmingham, England, arriving in 1907. In those days, Woodbrooke provided residential term and year-long courses, aimed at equipping Quakers for their 'ministry' in the world.

At Woodbrooke, Alice Paul participated in regular courses, and also did voluntary social work at the Summer Lane Settlement in Birmingham a couple of times each week. Summer Lane was, at the time, one of the most deprived areas of Birmingham with poor housing, poor health and a high infant mortality rate. The settlement worked primarily with women and children, organising medical services; a savings bank; a kindergarten; a weaving workshop for disabled girls; classes in motherhood, cooking and sewing; clubs for both adults and children; legal advice for those unable to afford a

solicitor; and a temperance pub to provide an alternative to the heavy drinking that went on in Summer Lane pubs.

Alice Paul additionally found time to attend Birmingham University as one of the early female Economics students there. Birmingham University sometimes hosted public meetings in the evenings. Alice Paul and some of the Woodbrooke students attended one where the speaker was the young suffragette leader, Christabel Pankhurst. Alice Paul had been interested in the conditions of women and children, and in the circumstances and causes of poverty. She was engaged in social work, but didn't see it as a solution. She had some knowledge of political science and economics. When she heard Christabel Pankhurst explain what militant suffragettes were doing, and why they were doing it, Alice Paul understood their motivation and methods quite clearly, and was in complete sympathy with what they were doing. There and then, it seems, she decided that this would be her life's work; that she would work to get votes for women to achieve equality and bring about an improvement in women and children's living conditions by this means.

Working for the vote

After a year at Woodbrooke, Alice Paul went to London, where she did some social work, and attended the London School of Economics. She joined the suffragette movement, sold suffrage newspapers, held

street corner meetings, and interrupted speeches being made by politicians. She made friends with Lucy Burns, who later worked with her in the suffrage campaign in America. Alice Paul was sent to prison on a few occasions in Britain, along with the other suffragettes. She returned to America in early 1910, and enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania. She was awarded a Ph.D in 1912 for her thesis on 'The Legal Position of Women in the State of Pennsylvania'.

She knew that women had been asking for the vote in America since at least 1848, and asking for equal rights for longer than that, but very little had changed. Only six states had given women the vote. She decided that a federal amendment to the constitution was the only way to achieve her aims, and she determined to go to the Capitol in Washington to work for the franchise. She got agreement from the National American Womens Suffrage Association that she and her friend Lucy Burns would go to Washington as an official committee to lobby congress, on the condition that they would not be paid by the association, and they would raise any monies needed for the work themselves.

The first thing Alice Paul did was to organize a suffrage march for the 3rd March 1913, the day before the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson as President of the United States. There were big crowds, near riots, and suffrage hit the headlines in the papers. They had brought suffrage to the attention of the public, and they aimed to keep it there, with ongoing parades and dramatic public events. They also put it on

the political agenda, asking President Wilson for a Federal Amendment granting women the vote, and they intended to keep bringing him that request until he granted it. Alice Paul also used some traditional campaigning methods, those of publishing a suffrage newspaper regularly, and of lobbying politicians. She and her colleagues kept a detailed card file on every politician, to try to use every opportunity to influence the politicians to support womens suffrage. She combined these methods with militant tactics, initially organizing protests and parades, while remaining strictly pacifist. She announced that they would hold the political party in power responsible for not granting women the vote, and they would organize people to vote against the governing party, until the politicians supported a federal amendment. Even where they knew this plan would not succeed the first time, they wanted politicians to be fearful of a recurrence of opposition to them at future elections.

Woodrow Wilson met Alice Paul with her colleagues each year until 1916, at which point he refused to meet them anymore. So Alice Paul sent a 'perpetual' delegation to the gates of the White House, and began picketing there in January 1917. They were tolerated until the United States entered World War I, and then they were told they would be arrested. They carried very provocative banners, calling for democracy to begin at home. They also started a watch fire, and burned copies of Wilsons' speeches, and speeches by other politicians who opposed suffrage, as soon as the speeches became available. They eventually burned effigies of Wilson. Several women, including

Alice Paul, were arrested, and jailed. The women organized train tours, called suffrage specials or prison specials, where they travelled across America, stopping at various towns to speak at suffrage meetings, dressed as prisoners, and telling of their ordeals. The jailings were counter-productive, because many of the public were not happy with such treatment of respectable white middle class women.

The vote is won!

Finally on 21st May, 1919, the House of Representatives passed the amendment, and the Senate passed it on 4th June, 1919. It stated: ‘The right of citizens of the united States to vote shall not be denied on account of sex.’ It then needed to be ratified by thirty-six states. The campaigns reverted to traditional methods in the states, and ratification was achieved by August 1920. Alice Paul then went fundraising for some months, and paid all the bills.

The vote is just the beginning

After gaining the vote, Alice Paul wanted to use it to get equality. She did a survey of all the laws in relation to women in each of the states. She identified that the most straightforward way to unpick the legion of discriminatory legislation would be by means of a further federal amendment to the constitution making equality explicit. In 1923 she

began a campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as follows: ‘Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States, and in every place subject to its jurisdiction.’ It was introduced in Congress in 1923, and almost every following year.

The Equal Rights Amendment was not passed by Congress until 1972, and then needed ratification in the states. There was opposition to it. Some were concerned for upholding protective workplace legislation. Labour Unions opposed it, as did some conservative groups. There was a time limit on ratification, and it finally failed with thirty-five states ratified of the thirty-eight needed. Alice Paul died in 1977.

Alice Paul’s legacy

She left a very valuable legacy in terms of the right to equality. Alice Paul led the Equal Rights Campaign in America in the early to mid 1940’s. When the founding of the United Nations was being negotiated in San Francisco in 1943, Alice Paul sent a delegation of women there, to get equality written into the Charter. The women also worked to influence the American Delegation to accept the inclusion of equality in the charter. Equality was written into the Preamble, and into several other parts of the United Nations Charter, making it quite specific. The benefit of this is where countries are re-writing their Constitution, and where they base it on the United Nations Charter, equality cases in the courts succeed much more easily. This is now being observed in court cases in South Africa. It proves that Alice

Paul was correct in wanting to write equality into the constitution, though it has not (as yet) succeeded in the United States.

Suggested questions for small-group discussion, worship sharing or journaling:

Alice Paul believed that Social Work would alleviate situations, but would not create fundamental change in society. Was she correct to aim for the big change, or is it the small everyday actions which change the world?

Alice Paul combined the militant tactics of the suffragettes with Quaker pacifism to achieve her aims. Are human rights upheld in imaginative and creative ways today?

How do you understand the equality testimony in the context of today's world, and what do you think is the spiritual basis of the equality testimony?

Further Reading:

Katherine H Adams and Michael L Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008)

Mary Walton, *A Woman's Crusade, Alice Paul and the Battle for the Ballot*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Inez Irwin Hayes, *The Story of Alice Paul and the National Women's Party*, (Washington D.C: The National Womens Party, 1964. Fairfax, Virginia: Denlingers Publishers Inc., 1977)

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