

## FRIENDS

*Dating from the 1650s in England, the Society of Friends, or Quakers, is an unconventional but much respected Protestant body. Because they affirm the “Inner Light,” the spiritual nerve-center that God has placed in every person, classical Friends deny the validity of clergy, liturgy, and sacraments. Worship takes the form of silent meetings, except when one is inspired to speak. The fact that every person has this inward spiritual endowment has prompted Friends to stand for the equality of all people, oppose slavery, and be exceptionally service-minded. Their record of providing for human physical, social, and spiritual needs is truly remarkable. In America since the mid-nineteenth century, some Friends have adapted the silent meeting to forms of church life that resemble standard evangelical practices, perhaps as much like Methodist as any other. But even there, the heritage of equality, and respect for and service to all remains very strong.*

With a membership in the U. S. and Canada of only 123,000 (200,000 around the world), Friends, better known as Quakers, have had a deep and lasting influence upon Western society. Contributions in both religious and humanitarian spheres have won universal respect and admiration, and their amazing history and loyalty to their quiet faith offer a challenge and inspiration to all churches.

The Friends’ vicissitudes and victories began when George Fox (1624-1691), a British seeker after spiritual truth and peace, failed to find them in the churches of his time. He did find them, however, in a new personal relationship with Christ: “When all my hopes in [churches] were gone . . . I heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.” That is the Inner Voice, or Inner Light, based upon the description of John 1:9: “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world”—a voice available to all, having nothing to do with ceremonies, rituals, or creeds. To Friends, every person is a walking church; every heart is God’s altar and shrine.

Quakerism was revolutionary, and it was treated as such by the state Church of England. To say that both state and church were wrong—that their theology and dogma meant nothing; that people need not attend “steeple houses” to find God; that it was equally wrong to pay taxes to support the state church clergy—this was rebellion.

Fox and his early followers went even further. They not only refused to go to church, but insisted upon freedom of speech, assembly, and worship. They would not take oaths in court; they refused to go to war; they doffed their hats to no one, king or commoner; they made no distinction in sex or social class; they condemned slavery and England’s treatment of prisoners and the insane. The very names they adopted—Children of Truth, Children of Light, Friends of Truth—aroused ridicule and fierce opposition. When Fox, hauled into court, advised one judge to “tremble at the Word of the Lord,” he heard the judge call him “a quaker.” But derision was not enough to stop the Friends. So persecution unsheathed its sword.

Quakers were whipped, jailed, tortured, mutilated, murdered. Fox spent six years in jail; others spent decades, even dying there. From 1650 until 1689, more than 3,000 suffered for conscience’ sake, and 300 to 400 died in prison. But thanks to that persecution, the group grew, and the Religious Society of Friends was founded in 1652. When Fox died, Quakers numbered 50,000.

Some were already in America. Ann Austin and Mary Fisher arrived in Massachusetts from Barbados in 1656, were promptly accused of being witches, and deported. Two days later, eight more Friends arrived from England. Hastily, laws were passed to keep them out; the whipping post worked overtime, but failed. Four were hanged in Boston. But Quakers kept coming—into New England, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania. Rhode Island and Pennsylvania welcomed them from the beginning, and the long horror in the communities that did not welcome them ended with the passage of the Toleration Act of 1689.

With that law and Fox's death, a new phase began. Persecution waned and died; Quakers settled down to business and farming, were known for their pacifism and honesty, and became quite prosperous. During that period of quiet, the meetings and community life became well organized. It was a time of creativeness and mystical inwardness; closely knit family life was emphasized. Quaker philanthropy became widely respected, even admired; their ideas on prison reform began to take effect. Quaker schools increased; as early as 1691, there were 15 Quaker boarding schools in England.

In 1682 William Penn came to Philadelphia. He sat under an elm at Shackamaxon and made a treaty with the Indians—the “only treaty never sworn to and never broken.” Treated like human beings, the Indians reacted in kind. If all our cities had been like Philadelphia and all our states like Pennsylvania, our national history might have been vastly different.

But the holy experiment had to end. Quakers controlled the Pennsylvania legislature until 1756, when they refused to vote a tax to pay for a war against the Shawnees and Delawares, and consequently stepped down and out of power.

Quakers, looking within rather than without, began to enforce such strict discipline upon their members that they became in fact a “peculiar people.” Members were disowned or dismissed for even minor infractions; thousands were cut off for “marrying out of Meeting.” Pleasure, music, and art were taboo; sobriety, punctuality, and honesty were demanded in all directions; dress was painfully plain, and speech was biblical. They were “different” and dour; they gained few new converts and lost many old members.

Some few “fighting Quakers” went to battle in the American Revolution, but most remained pacifists, working quietly for peace, popular education, temperance, democracy—and against slavery. Their first attitude of tolerance changed slowly to one of outright opposition. In 1688 the Friends of Germantown, Pennsylvania, announced that slavery violated the Golden Rule and that it encouraged adultery; they called “traffic in the bodies of men” unlawful. It took nearly a century for Quakers to rid their own society of slavery, but they did it years in advance of any other religious body in America. Sellers or purchasers of slaves were forbidden membership in the society by the end of the eighteenth century. Persistently, across the years, they dropped their seeds of antislavery agitation into the body politic. First John Woolman, then the poet Whittier, wielded tremendous influence. Once the Civil War was over, Friends threw their strength into such organizations as the Freedman's Aid Society, and ever since, they have been active in education and legislative protection for blacks.

Divisions arose within the ranks during those years: The Hicksites separated in 1827, the Wilburites in 1845, the Primitives (a small group now extinct) in 1861. Of these separations, the one led by Elias Hicks is of primary concern. Hicks was a rural Long Island Quaker, and his liberal and rational theological views brought him into conflict with those more orthodox and evangelical. While the division in 1827 had personal and

sociological emphases, the split was basically due to the nineteenth-century conflict between a rational liberalism, and an orthodoxy based on Methodist ideas of evangelism and salvation. Two-thirds of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting withdrew with the Hicksites (a name never officially adopted), and similar divisions followed in New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Baltimore. Another series of separations, a result of Wesleyan Methodist influence, was led by Joseph John Gurney and John Wilbur (see Religious Society of Friends [Conservative]).

The twentieth century thus far has been one of Quaker unity and outreach. A Five Years Meeting (now Friends' United Meeting) was organized in 1902, merging a large number of the pastoral yearly meetings. The two Philadelphia meetings, separated since 1827, were united in 1955; in the same year, the two New York Yearly Meetings merged, and the three Canada Yearly Meetings came together to form one body; in 1968, two Baltimore Yearly Meetings reunited; in 1972, the Southeastern Meeting, newly founded, affiliated with Friends United Meeting and Friends General Conference.

During World War 1, Friends from all branches of the society were at work in the American Friends Service Committee in relief and reconstruction efforts abroad. The A.F.S.C. remains today one of the most effective of such agencies in the world. Its volunteers erected demountable houses, staffed hospitals, plowed fields, raised domestic animals, and drove ambulances. Famine relief and child-feeding programs were instituted in Serbia, Poland, Austria, Russia, and Germany; at one time, Friends were feeding more than one million German children a day; Greek refugees, Japanese earthquake victims, and miners' families in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky were helped. Thousands would have perished but for the A.F.S.C.

Friends served in the medical corps of both world wars, and some were in combat; probably more young Friends volunteered for or accepted military service than resisted on grounds of religious principle. They also worked to relieve our displaced Japanese-Americans during World War II, and they cooperated with Brethren and Mennonites in locating conscientious objectors in work of real importance on farms, and in reformatories, hospitals, and mental institutions. They were in Spain soon after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War; later they supplied food for children in Spain, southern France, Italy, Austria, Holland, North Africa, and Finland. In 1945 alone, they sent 282 tons of clothes, shoes, bedding, and soap to Europe, and still more to China and India. Counting both cash and material gifts, the income of the A.F.S.C. is apt to exceed \$7.5 million annually.

Nor have Friends been satisfied to work merely in relief. Peace conferences have had a prominent place, ranging from local to international and covering all age groups. Lake Mohonk in New York was founded by a Friend. Scores of youth conferences and camps at home and in foreign fields testify to devotion to the way of Christ; young volunteers in summer camps have inspired incalculable goodwill among nations, and among minority groups within nations. It is little wonder that it is known as a "peace church."

Worship and business in the society are conducted in monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. The monthly meeting is the basic unit, made up of one or more meetings (groups) in a neighborhood. It convenes each week for worship and once a month for business. It keeps records of membership, births, deaths, and marriages; appoints committees; considers queries on spiritual welfare; and transacts all business. Monthly meetings join four times a year in a quarterly meeting to stimulate spiritual life and decide on any business that should be brought to the attention of the yearly meeting. The yearly

meeting corresponds to a diocese in an episcopal system. There are 27 in the U. S. and Canada, in touch with Friends all over the world. There are standing committees on such subjects as publications, education, the social order, missions, peace, charities, and national legislation; trust fund incomes are allocated, and the work of the society is generally supervised.

Group decisions await the "sense of the meeting." Lacking unity of opinion, the meeting may have a "quiet time" until unity is found, or it may postpone consideration of the matter or refer it to a committee for study. Minority opinion is not outvoted, but convinced. Every man, woman, and child is free to speak in any meeting; delegates are appointed at quarterly and yearly meetings to ensure adequate representation, but enjoy no unusual position or prerogatives. Women and men hold positions of absolute equality.

There are, contrary to popular misunderstanding, church officers—elders and ministers—chosen for recognized ability in spiritual leadership, but they too stand on equal footing with the rest of the membership. To the Friend, all members are ministers. A few full-time workers are paid a modest salary, and "recorded" ministers who serve as pastors in meetings that have programmed worship also receive salaries (about 1,000 meetings have no paid pastors).

Worship may be either programmed or unprogrammed, but the two are not always distinct. The former more nearly resembles a simple Protestant service, although there are no rites or outward sacraments. While Friends believe in spiritual communion, partaking of the elements is thought unnecessary. In unprogrammed meetings there is no choir, collection, singing, or pulpit; the service is devoted to quiet meditation, prayer, and communion. Any vocal contributions are spontaneous. There is no uniform practice; most churches greatly prefer to be called meetings.

In business meetings there often is frank inquiry into members' conduct of business, treatment of others, use of narcotics or intoxicants, reading habits, and recreation. No true Friend gambles, plays the stock market, bets, owns racehorses, or engages in raffles, lotteries, or the liquor business. Some follow conservative religious or theological patterns; others are liberal; all are guided by the Inner Light.

The Inner Light is highly important. Friends believe that grace, the power from God to help humankind resist evil, is universal among all people. They seek not holiness, but perfection—a higher, more spiritual standard of life for both society and the individual—and they believe that the truth is unfolding and continuing. They value the Bible highly but prefer to rely upon fresh individual guidance from the Spirit of God which produced the Bible, rather than follow only what has been revealed to others. Some modern groups accept the Bible as the final authority in all religious matters. Rufus Jones says:

They believe supremely in the nearness of God to the human soul, in direct intercourse and immediate communion, in mystical experience in a firsthand discovery of God. . . . It means and involves a sensitiveness to the wider spiritual Life above us, around us, and within us, a dedication to duty, a passion for truth, and an appreciation of goodness, an eagerness to let love and the grace of God come freely through one's own life, a reverence for the will of God wherever it is revealed in past or present, and a high faith that Christ is a living presence and a life-giving energy always within reach of the receptive soul.

No Quaker body has ever departed from the Declaration to Charles II in 1661: "We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fighting with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretense whatever. . . . The spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will

never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ, not for the kingdoms of this world." However, there is great tolerance toward individual variations in this position. During World War II, the formal Quaker position favored applying for conscientious-objector status, either as a noncombatant within the military or in alternate service; in the case of the Vietnam war, corporate positions shifted toward encouraging men to practice draft refusal and go to jail if necessary. In both cases a wide variety of positions was seen as acceptable; the emphasis was on following individual conscience. Friends who enter military service are no longer disowned from membership, but many leave the society and join a church that does not profess pacifism. Conversely, pacifists brought up in other traditions tend to join the Friends in young adulthood.

Marriage is not necessarily a ceremony to be performed by a minister; in cases where the traditional Quaker marriage is observed, the bride and groom simply stand before a meeting and make mutual vows of love and faithfulness. In certain sections of the country the pastor of the meeting officiates.

Friends have never been great proselytizers; they depend almost entirely upon birthright membership and membership by "convincement." In many bodies, though not all, every child born of Quaker parents is declared a member of the society. This has resulted in a large number of nominal, or paper, members who contribute little; efforts are being made to correct this custom by establishing a junior, or associate, membership for children. This reliance upon birthright membership has seriously depleted their numbers.

If Friends were ever "exclusive," they no longer are ; a world outreach has been evident and growing in recent years. Friends' United Meeting and Friends General Conference are members of the World Council of Churches; the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting belongs to the National Council of Churches. Friends World Committee for Consultation, organized at Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, following the Second World Conference of Friends in 1937, functions as an agent, or clearinghouse, for interchange of Quaker aspirations and experiences through regional, national, and international intervisitation, person-to-person consultations, conferences, correspondence, and a variety of publications. The committee has headquarters in Birmingham, England, and offices in Philadelphia, in Plainfield, Indiana, and in Edinburgh, Scotland. The American section has helped some 50 small U. S. Friends groups to attain monthly meeting status. The F.W.C.C. is a nongovernmental organization related to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, through cooperation with the A.F.S.C.; it helps operate a program at U. N. headquarters to forward world peace and human unity. Something of a world community, or "Franciscan Third Order," has been set up in the Wider Quaker Fellowship, in which non-Friends in sympathy with the spirit and program may participate in the work without coming into full membership. This is not so much an organization as "a fellowship of kindred minds—a way of life, a contagion of spirit"; it has 4,200 members, 360 of whom live abroad.

An Evangelical Friends Alliance was formed in 1965 in the interests of evangelical emphasis and denominational unity; it seeks to bring together those interested in an evangelical renewal within Christianity and a renewal of interest in the evangelical emphases of seventeenth-century Quakerism; it includes the Association of Evangelical Friends. Theology here is conservative; local pastors are elected. There are 217 churches and 24,095 members.

A further movement toward unity is found in the Religious Society of Friends (Unaffiliated Meetings), which also stresses elements and teachings of early Friends movements. This group is unique in its wide variety and experimentation in worship and polity; it is not associated with the larger bodies in the society. There are 112 churches with 6,386 members.

### **Friends General Conference**

This is a national organization of yearly meetings (Baltimore, Lake Erie, South Central, Canada, New England, Illinois, Indiana, Southeastern, New York, and Philadelphia). It was established in 1868 as a Sunday school conference and matured in 1900 as a general conference for fellowship across yearly meeting boundaries, as an instrument for deepening the spiritual and social testimonies of the Society of Friends. One of its main features is an annual conference; in 1978 it had 1,500 members, about one-third of whom were children and young people. There are now 31,600 members and 505 meetings in the general conference, a fraction of which also belong to Friends United Meeting; this is explained by dual membership in Canada, New York, and New England in the General Conference and in Friends United Meeting.

### **Friends United Meeting (Five Years Meeting)**

With 58,357 members and 547 local meetings in 1987, this is the largest single Friends body in the U. S. Organized in 1902, it brought together in one cooperative relationship 18 yearly meetings at home and six abroad-in East Africa, Cuba, and Jamaica-with a somewhat different status. They work together in many departments, such as missionary service and the production of Sunday school materials; while each is autonomous, they come together for spiritual stimulation, business, and conference every three years.

The ministries are carried forward between triennial sessions by three planning commissions and the general board, which convene semiannually. Affirming the importance of personal religious experience, this group embodies a creative balance of central Quaker accents, evangelism and social concern, mission and service, worship, and ministry. Friends of various persuasions work together within the FUM spectrum. It seeks to implement its commitment as a classic "peace church." Membership is concentrated in North Carolina, Indiana, Ohio, and Iowa.

### **Religious Society of Friends (Conservative)**

Known also as Wilburites, this group resulted from a second division. Joseph John Gurney, a British evangelical Quaker, came to America in 1837 and began to preach and teach the final authority of the Bible and acceptance of the doctrines of atonement, justification, and sanctification. John Wilbur, a Rhode Island conservative, while not denouncing the authority of the Bible and its teachings, felt that Gurney's preaching substituted a creed for the immediate revelation of the Divine Spirit available to human beings. Both men had large followings; the outcome, from 1845 through 1904, was separation in Kansas, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, New England, North Carolina, and Canada.

The conservative pattern generally was one "set forth by the Society in the beginning." It called for silent waiting before God, in expectation that the Spirit would instruct and move a person to speak or pray without program or ritual.

In New England in 1945, and in Canada in 1955, differences were resolved between these two groups and they were reunited. There are still conservative yearly meetings in Iowa, Ohio, and North Carolina; it cooperates with other Friends groups in various areas of service and in intervisitation. There are 27 monthly meetings and nearly 2,000 members.

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