

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Beginnings of Quakerism

The Religious Society of Friends originated in England at the time of the Puritan Revolution (about 1642-1660). There was a growing sense of personal religious independence among the people that resulted in the temporary overthrow of the monarchy and the installation of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector. Dissatisfaction with the established church resulted in many quick-growing, but often short-lived, sects and in a large number of restless, searching spirits.

George Fox (1624-1691), one of the first Quakers, was of this seeking type of mind. Born in 1624, he began when nineteen years old a solitary, spiritual quest for Truth. He recorded in his *Journal* that at last in 1646, “when all my hopes in...all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,’ and, when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.”³⁰

In 1647 Fox began to preach, convincing many people, and in 1648 a whole community in Nottinghamshire accepted his message and, associating together, called themselves Children of the Light, the earliest name by which Friends were known. From this time on, the number of his followers grew rapidly.

Puritan ministers then taught that God’s revelation to humanity lay only in the work of the historic Christ as recorded in the Bible and that, until the judgment at the Second Coming, God would not speak again. Fox proclaimed that God speaks directly to each human soul through an immediate, living experience of revelation, the Inward Light of Christ, requiring no human mediator to translate God’s meaning to the individual.

A Brief History

George Fox was a powerful personality. In *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, William Braithwaite described him as having “combined in a singular degree the burning zeal of the enthusiast with the magnetic force of a born leader of men” and such was the power of the truth he and other early Friends preached, “that a single man or woman living in the spirit of the apostles and prophets would shake all the country...for ten miles round.”³¹

He soon attracted a group of young men and women who became inspired preachers of this new religious force; they were called Publishers of Truth. These were joined by other earnest men and women. They engaged in the difficult work of spreading the movement, traveling in twos and threes throughout the length and breadth of England and extending their labors into Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, although often hindered by imprisonment and persecution. Undismayed by every sort of difficulty, they fed the inward spiritual flame of widely separated groups, stimulating their zeal, holding them in the bond of group-consciousness, and providing for them a channel of communication.

Margaret Fell (1614-1702), often called the Mother of Quakerism, was an early convert and an equally powerful personality. Swarthmoor Hall, her home, became a center of activity, a stable focal point giving the movement a sense of community and strength. She set up a central fund to help those on long preaching trips, in prison, in isolated meetings, and later to promote the establishment of women’s meetings. Eleven years after the death of her husband, Judge Thomas Fell, she and George Fox were married.

The powerful preaching of these leaders was supported by the daily life of the first Friends. Along with an intense religious fervor there ran a life of practical righteousness. Justice, temperance, commercial honesty, and observance of all civil laws that did not violate their conscience were vitally important matters. Braithwaite wrote, “None could dispute the validity of a Christianity which resulted in consistent and Christ-touched lives. In such lives, amid

A Brief History

all their imperfections, the Inward Light was justified of its children.”³²

A deep realization of the equality of all persons before God led to the early recognition of the spiritual gifts of women as equal to those of men and the acceptance of their public preaching. Among other outward behaviors, it also brought about the use of the “plain” language and Friends’ refusal to remove their hats in the presence of those deemed their social superiors—customs which caused frequent persecution. Still greater suffering resulted from their refusal to take oaths or to pay tithes for the upkeep of the state church.

With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the Anglican Church was re-established as the official religion of the state and no other worship was permitted. An era of persecution was inaugurated for all religious non-conformists. Most religious dissenters went into hiding, but Friends persisted and endured long imprisonments, disastrous fines, and cruel treatment. Their meetings were often broken up and meetinghouses destroyed. But because their consciences assured them that resistance to an unjust law was no sin, they maintained their way of worship openly and bravely despite every effort to stop them. In some places, when all adult Friends were jailed, the children continued to hold meetings for worship alone.

Faithfulness in persisting according to their religious convictions, with no evasion of the penalties of the law, was an important factor in finally winning legal recognition for liberty of conscience and religious toleration. But for the Society of Friends itself, the persecution had some unfortunate results: it restricted the itinerant services of the Publishers of Truth, isolated meetings, and hastened the necessity for organizing what had been a glorious creative movement into a sect.

From 1667 on, George Fox was active in helping to organize the system of monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings and in arranging

A Brief History

their methods of procedure. Women's business meetings were set up in addition to men's. A Meeting of Ministers and a Meeting for Sufferings (at first, this was a body concerned with assisting those suffering persecution and their families; it developed into a yearly meeting Executive Committee) were established.

The earliest concerns of these business meetings were to provide for the poor and prisoners, to check the vagaries of individual judgment, to admonish delinquents, to provide for carrying on work at home, to cover the expenses of ministers traveling beyond the seas, and to keep accurate records. While the discipline thus set up was no equivalent for the compelling power of widespread evangelism, it did foster well-ordered and noble lives.

Efforts at formulation of doctrine soon followed, and in this, Robert Barclay (1648-1690) and William Penn (1644-1718) were the foremost figures. Barclay's most complete exposition was his *Apology*. His Quakerism was affected by current Puritan theology. The influence of their writings was so great as to be felt as late as the nineteenth century when various separations occurred within the Religious Society of Friends.

The development of the early movement into a sect was underway. Along with the formulation of doctrine there were growing experiments toward improving the social order. These included justice toward workmen and employees, and efforts to reestablish the poor in business, along with plans for giving work to those in prison, the establishment of humane workhouses, and active concern for the treatment of the insane. Temperance and the question of slavery claimed the attention of Friends. In the colonies of Pennsylvania and Rhode Island bold attempts were made to establish truly Christian commonwealths.

A Brief History

Friends in the American Colonies

As early as 1655 the New World had attracted Friends. Efforts were made during the following years to plant the seeds of Quakerism in Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia. In the latter two colonies there was some persecution, but the martyrs of Quakerism in America met their test in Massachusetts. Everything that the authorities could devise was tried to stop the spread of Quaker Truth in this colony. Harrowing tortures were endured, many underwent punishment again and again, and four suffered death. After ten years of persecution, they succeeded in breaking down the intolerant laws.

During this period, an early haven was found in Rhode Island, where the first meeting in the New World was established. This colony became the center of New England Quakerism. Its long line of Quaker Governors and men in public positions did eminent service in the political life of the colony until the time of the Revolutionary War.

A period of expansion followed George Fox's visit to America in 1671-1673. New meetings were established in New York, Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, and in greater numbers in New Jersey and, a decade later, in Pennsylvania.

These last two colonies had been opened for settlement later than the others, but conditions were especially favorable. West Jersey was bought by a group of Friends in 1674 and in 1681 Pennsylvania was granted to William Penn, so that there Quakers had freedom and peace and unparalleled opportunity to try out their ability to conduct a Christian government. William Penn was a statesman of high order, an outstanding advocate of justice for Native Americans, and a champion of liberty of conscience. He designed a government based on advanced ideas of civil and religious liberty and equality, which was a forerunner of that laid out in the Constitution of the United States. Friends maintained almost absolute political control

A Brief History

of Pennsylvania until 1740 and were a power for fifteen years longer, when measures by the colonial government to support military action in the French and Indian War led most to resign from the Assembly. At this time, Friends largely withdrew from all participation in government and political life.

Penn's initially successful policy of Friends toward Native Americans was the outcome of their sense of justice and their conviction that before God all persons are equal, irrespective of their color. These principles also came to be expressed in their attitudes on another great question—that of slavery. In 1671 George Fox had advised giving slaves their freedom after a period of years. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting advised against the slave trade in 1696, and such sentiment grew slowly until 1758 when John Woolman made a moving plea for the liberty of slaves and began the great work of his life. He aroused Friends in both America and England, many of whom became influential actors and tireless workers until slavery was finally abolished.

Friends' opposition to war largely took them out of public life. This fact together with the increasing influence within the Society of Quietism caused a profound transformation in the Society. More and more Friends in the latter half of the 18th century withdrew as much as possible from involvement with the outside world and centered upon perfecting their own spiritual lives. They built a "hedge" around their Society with the rules and customs of a peculiar people. This preserved some valuable features, but it also brought a narrowing introspection that was fertile ground for controversy.

The Second Period of Quakerism

Early in the 19th century two very divergent tendencies could be seen within Quakerism. One was toward a zealous evangelicalism which was fostered by a number of prominent Quaker ministers, some of whom came over from England, and was accelerated by the

A Brief History

popular rise of the Methodist movement. The other was toward a reaffirmation of the centrality of the Inward Light of Christ as a sufficient basis for faith. Job Scott, a saintly man and true mystic, and Elias Hicks, a prophetic minister, were the chief spokesmen for the latter.

The chasm grew steadily wider until 1827 when a separation occurred in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. This tragedy was due to lack of historical knowledge, lack of spiritual understanding and lack of love for one another, and was followed by withdrawals by one side or the other in many other meetings, forming so-called “Hicksite” and so-called “Orthodox” branches. Further separations occurred over the last 200 years, resulting in the fractured Society seen today.

Yet the 19th century did contain some advances in Quaker development. A great migration of Friends into new territory in the Midwest took place and new yearly meetings in Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, and Illinois were established.

The retirement of Friends from public affairs also helped to stimulate their zeal for purely moral causes, such as the abolition of slavery, concern for the welfare of African-Americans and Native Americans, the work for social morality, the suppression of liquor traffic, and prison reform.

The women’s rights movement grew out of the involvement of Quaker women in the anti-slavery movement. By publicly and extensively lecturing against slavery, they did much to break down the barrier against women speaking in public. Lucretia Mott, a Quaker minister and abolitionist, along with Mary Ann M’Clintock, Martha Coffin Wright, Jane Hunt, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, organized the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, which marked the formal beginning of the organized crusade for the rights of women.

A Brief History

Education has been a deep concern of Friends from their earliest history, and monthly meeting schools, boarding schools, and colleges have been established.

History of Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting

During the early 18th Century many Friends were attracted southward into Virginia and the Carolinas and some became involved in the institution of slavery. As a result of the labors of Francis Daniel Pastorius, William Southeby, Benjamin Lay, John Woolman, Anthony Benezet, Sarah Grimké, Angelina Grimké Weld, Lucretia Mott, Levi and Catherine Coffin, Sophia Sturge and others, Friends came to believe slavery a curse; and slowly the conscience of the Society of Friends was awakened to the evil. Following the Revolutionary War, many Friends in the South decided to migrate to the slave-free lands in the Northwest Territory to begin a new life.

The migration to the Waynesville, Ohio area began in 1799 when Abijah O'Neal and his family left Bush River, South Carolina, and settled on some 3,000 acres on the east bank of the Little Miami River north of Caesar's Creek. Within 15 years, more than 18,000 Quakers from the Carolinas and Georgia had left the land of slavery and made for the North to find a new home. Others came to the Miami country from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and other seaboard states.

In April 1801, twelve families (81 individuals) in the Waynesville area began meeting for worship in a member's home. Near the end of that year they sent a request to Westland Meeting, Pennsylvania (Baltimore Yearly Meeting) to hold meetings for worship on Sundays and Thursdays. This request was granted in September 1802. Early in 1803 they asked Redstone Quarterly Meeting for permission to establish a monthly meeting; and when the request was approved, Miami Monthly Meeting was opened on October 13, 1803. Its eastern boundary was the Hocking River, the southern was the Ohio

A Brief History

River, but there was no limit to the north or to the west. During this period of migration, hundreds of Friends from the Carolinas and Georgia brought their membership to Miami Monthly Meeting, until such time as other meetings could be established in the Northwest Territory. By 1815, Miami Monthly Meeting was said to have the largest membership of any Friends Meeting in Quakerdom.

After its establishment in 1803, Miami Monthly Meeting set off many new Meetings. Among the earliest ones were Lees Creek, Hardin Creek, Caesar's Creek, West Branch, Elk, Center and Whitewater. In 1807 Miami, West Branch and Center Monthly Meetings requested that a new quarterly meeting be established to be known as Miami Quarterly Meeting and held at Waynesville, Ohio, on the second Saturday in February, May, August and November. Baltimore Yearly Meeting having approved the request, Miami Quarterly Meeting was opened in May 1809. The building of the White Brick Meetinghouse at Waynesville was begun in 1811 to accommodate the Quarterly Meeting.

In 1812, Baltimore Yearly Meeting granted permission to the quarterly meetings west of the Allegheny Mountains to form Ohio Yearly Meeting. The first session was held at Short Creek on the 14th of August 1813. The Ohio Yearly Meeting included all meetings in Ohio, Indiana Territory and adjacent areas of Pennsylvania and Virginia.

In 1820, Miami Quarterly Meeting proposed that all Meetings in Illinois, Indiana, and western Ohio be formed into a new yearly meeting. The quarterly meetings making up the proposed yearly meeting were Miami, West Branch, Fairfield, Whitewater, and Blue River Quarterlies. Ohio Yearly Meeting approved the proposal, and the first session of Indiana Yearly Meeting was held in the Whitewater (Richmond, Indiana) Meetinghouse on August 10, 1821.

When separation occurred in 1828, the Yearly Meeting split into two bodies: Indiana Yearly Meeting (Orthodox), and Indiana Yearly Meeting (Hicksite). At Waynesville, the Hicksite body retained the

A Brief History

meetinghouse. However, in many other cases west of the Alleghenies, the Orthodox body retained it.

For nearly 150 years, there were two bodies known as Indiana Yearly Meeting. In 1975, it seemed desirable for Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends General Conference to change its name to eliminate the avoidable confusion resulting from identical official names and to better identify the area included in its membership. For these reasons, in 1976, the name was changed to Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting.

The Yearly Meeting is composed of two Quarters: Miami and Whitewater.

In 2020, Whitewater Quarter consists of Bloomington, Clear Creek (Richmond), Fall Creek (Pendleton), Fort Wayne, Lafayette, North Meadow Circle (Indianapolis), and White Rose (Wabash) Monthly Meetings in Indiana.

Miami Quarter consists of Campus (Wilmington), Community (Cincinnati), Dayton, Eastern Hills (Cincinnati), Miami (Waynesville), Oxford, and Yellow Springs Monthly Meetings in Ohio, as well as Lexington and Louisville Monthly Meetings in Kentucky.