

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



elcome to
Friends Meeting



*"No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel,
but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house."
-Matthew 5:15*

Little Egg Harbor Friends Meeting
Tuckerton, New Jersey

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Page 2

INTRODUCTION

The following material is intended to be a brief, convenient source of information for attenders who are beginning to consider membership or regular attendance, but who realize that their knowledge of the Religious Society of Friends is rather slight. It attempts to answer some of the questions they may have and to acquaint them with resources for further study.

1. WHAT DO FRIENDS BELIEVE?

The central belief of Friends is that there is something of the Divine in every one and that each person can have a direct experience of God without an intermediary. "Inward Light," "Christ within," "That of God in Everyone"—these are commonly used names for this doctrine. This sense of the immediacy of God is nurtured, Friends believe, by the Meeting for Worship.

Because there is no binding creed, it is difficult to say with certainty that all Friends believe certain things. Most Friends have placed greater emphasis on guiding principles for their lives than on theological points. Howard Brinton, an articulate twentieth century Friend, made an analysis of the effects of the Light from God streaming down into the waiting group. He said that the resulting behavior could be described by the four words—*Community, Harmony, Equality, and Simplicity*.

Another well-known Friend, William Wistar Comfort, believed that Quakerism has four essential tenets or foundation principles. The first tenet is that of the *Inward Light*. The second is *Universality of Grace*, by which Comfort meant the power to resist evil and do good. The third he termed "the call to perfection: or the *Obligation to Seek Perfection*. His final tenet was the belief in a *Continuing Revelation of God's Will*. As did early Friends, Comfort considered the Bible a source of truth, but not the only one. To him, as to them, God continues to be accessible to us and to guide us.

It is always difficult to separate Friends' beliefs from Friends' actions. The belief in the Inward Light has led Friends to work for peace and to advance a variety of causes, among them improving the treatment of prisoners and the mentally ill; coeducation; women's rights. Many Friends try to follow the still-valid advice, "Let your lives speak."

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Page 3

2. IF THERE IS NO MINISTER, PRIEST, OR RABBI IN CHARGE, WHAT KIND OF ORGANIZATION IS THERE, AND HOW DO THINGS GET DONE?

Each Monthly Meeting appoints a clerk, a treasurer, a recorder, and usually a recording clerk. Clerks preside at the monthly Meetings for Business, facilitating but not dominating the proceedings. The ideal of servant leadership is an important one to Friends. In very small Meetings, necessary activities may be carried out by everyone acting as a committee of the whole, but usually there are separate committees for such areas as the care of members, the conduct of worship, religious education, the management of property, decisions on membership, and issues of social action.

Committees carry out the work of the Meeting, reporting and making recommendations, for action to the Monthly Meeting. After consideration and discussion of a recommended action, the Meeting makes a decision, based not on voting, but on reaching clarity through what is known as the sense of the meeting. When a true sense of the meeting is achieved, those present feel a spiritual unity that goes beyond individual differences. Some decisions are, of course, more or less routine and do not require a lengthy period of deliberation.

Individuals, as well as committees, may bring to the Meeting a proposal for an action.. sometimes such a proposal can be referred to the appropriate committee for further study. At other times, especially when the proposal seems to come from a deeply-felt concern, the Meeting as a whole considers it and decides whether or not to take action.

Friends are not organized in a hierarchical manner, but through concerns and the committees that carry out those concerns they are able to accomplish a great deal.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Page 4

3. IS THE MEETING THAT I'VE BEEN ATTENDING INDEPENDENT, OR IS IT PART OF A LARGER ORGANIZATION?

The Monthly Meeting is the fundamental unit for Friends. It corresponds to the local church, synagogue, or mosque of other religious groups. It is part of a wider organization, but it is autonomous. Its members meet monthly to plan and carry out its activities and responsibilities. All action concerning membership is taken in and by the Monthly Meeting.

The Quarterly Meeting consists of a group of neighboring Monthly Meetings that traditionally meet four times a year. Although some Quarterly Meetings are very active, with paid staff to develop programs in various areas, others meet less frequently and seem not to feel the need for this intermediate organization.

The Yearly Meeting is the largest unit, made up of the membership of the constituent Monthly Meetings. Its annual sessions, which all are encouraged to attend, usually last for several days. Yearly Meeting committees and others report on their work; the annual budget is approved; concerns are presented; specific actions are taken. For many of those who attend, it is a time of spiritual refreshment and renewal. So that decisions can be implemented during the year, Interim Meeting meets once each month to take care of the business of the Yearly Meeting when it is not in session.

Anyone who becomes a member of a Monthly Meeting also becomes a member of a Quarterly Meeting and a Yearly Meeting. The organization is not hierarchical. Yearly Meeting officers and committee members are also members of Monthly Meetings. They do not hold positions of authority. Policies that they help to carry out are those determined by the Yearly Meeting as a whole.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Page 5

4. WHAT ARE SOME BASIC READINGS THAT WILL BE USEFUL TO ME?

The following list is not meant to be exhaustive. From the earliest *Journal of George Fox* to the present day, Friends have been writing. Exploring those writings can lead to a lifetime of reading. Local Meeting libraries and the Yearly Meeting Library can supplement the resources noted here.

Faith and Practice, subtitled *A Book of Discipline and Advice*, will answer many of the questions newcomers have. This should be a primary source of information.

Friends General Conference pamphlets—These are on such topics as Friends and the Bible, Friends and God, Friends and Worship. They are usually free, and most Meetings keep a supply of them on hand.

Friends for 300 Years—Howard Brinton. Although this is not a recent book, it remains a valuable and interesting source of Quaker history and present day practices.

Pendle Hill pamphlets—Pendle Hill is a Quaker study center and a publisher of pamphlets. Also, Pendle Hill and the Religious Education Committee of the Yearly Meeting usually sponsor three Inquirers' weekends a year. Attending one of these weekends could be very helpful to anyone new to Quakerism.

Friends Journal—This monthly publication provides an overview of Friends activities around the world.

PYM News—Published five times a year, this is a good source of information about the Yearly Meeting's current activities.

Two Yearly Meeting publications, the *Yearbook* and the *Directory*, give specific information about committees, membership statistics, locations of Meetings, names of Friends who serve on committees, and many other matters. Minutes of the annual sessions of the Yearly Meeting are also included.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Page 6

5. ARE ALL MEETINGS LIKE THIS ONE?

Meetings are not all alike, except in their basic beliefs. Their practices may vary greatly. A large Meeting may have numerous children in a multi-class First-day School. A smaller Meeting may have only a few children and no structured program for them. Some Meetings, regardless of size, are active in their community and with social concerns generally; for others, the spiritual nurture of the Meeting is the primary focus. Adult forums, hymn singing, pot-luck suppers, and other activities are part of some Meetings, but not all. In some Meetings, the Bible is studied and cited frequently in the spoken ministry; in other Meetings there is not much mention of it.

If there are several Meetings in the area, prospective members should probably visit more than one, to see where they fit most comfortably.

6. WHY HAVEN'T PEOPLE IN THE MEETING URGED ME TO JOIN?

An unwillingness to urge membership on attenders who may not be ready to join can sometimes give the impression that a Meeting does not want new members. The decision to join the Religious Society of Friends is usually not a simple one. Someone who has enjoyed the music that is part of other church services may have to overcome a reluctance to give it up. Another person may appreciate Friends' way of worship, but may not feel in harmony with one or more of Friends' testimonies. Conversely, one who is attracted to Friends because of the peace testimony may become impatient if the Meeting is not involved in social issues.

An unprogrammed Meeting cannot attract members because of its competent choir, its stained glass windows, or the inspiring sermons of its paid clergy. It is a community united in spirit, but sometimes diverse in beliefs. A prospective member needs to feel comfortable being a part of such a community. The time needed for that feeling to develop can vary greatly, but for most people the process is a gradual one, resulting from attendance at Meetings for Worship and Business over an extended period of time. It is to be hoped that while the attender is exploring the idea of membership, Meeting members are reaching out to him or her, anticipating questions and demonstrating the fellowship of a Friends Meeting.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Page 7

7. IF I DECIDE THAT I WANT TO JOIN, WHAT DO I DO?

Once the decision to join has been made, the procedure is a fairly simple one. A letter to the clerk of the Monthly Meeting, requesting membership, is the first step. The letter need not be long or detailed, but it should reflect an understanding of Friends' beliefs and practices. The clerk will refer the request to the Overseers Committee, who will appoint a clearness committee to visit the applicant.

The committee's visit is a time for questions to be answered, beliefs to be explored, and responsibilities to be explained. If the visit is mutually satisfactory, the committee will recommend acceptance of the application. The Monthly Meeting then approves the recommendation, accepts the person into membership, and appoints a welcoming committee.

8. WHAT RESPONSIBILITIES WILL I HAVE AS A MEMBER?

The first and most important responsibility is that of regular attendance at Meetings for Worship and at monthly Meetings for Business. The Meeting is a spiritual community, and a sense of community is hard to maintain when attendance is sporadic.

Serving on Meeting committees as time and energy permit is also important. Working on the Meeting's finances, keeping a watchful eye out for needed repairs, helping to organize social gatherings, listening to people's problems and trying to find a solution, caring for young children during Meeting for Worship, teaching a First-day School class—the list of ways to serve is a long one. Once a committee appointment has been accepted, the committee members should strive for regular attendance at committee meetings.

Contributing financially to the Meeting is also a responsibility. Although some Meetings are well endowed, many are not; all need the financial support of their members.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Page 8

LITTLE EGG HARBOR FRIENDS MEETING

This area of South Jersey was settled by first and second generation Quaker pioneers from England in the early years of the 18th century. Their bodies now lie in unmarked graves in the Meeting's cemetery. The earliest extant records tell us that Meetings for Worship were held in the home of Edward Andrews as early as 1702.

In 1709 when Chesterfield Meeting granted an "allowed Meeting" to Little Egg Harbor Friends, a one-story gambrel roof Meetinghouse was built. Its sides were covered with native cedar shingles. The windows were diamond-shaped panes. It has been suggested that the roof was sod. The present Meetinghouse was built in 1863, replacing the original, which was torn down and used for salvage.

When Monthly Meeting status was granted to Little Egg Harbor Meeting in 1715, it was the only Monthly Meeting between Cape May and Shrewsbury along the Jersey coast at that time. Throughout the 18th century and well into the 19th century Little Egg Harbor was a leading center of Quakerism in South Jersey and produced a number of distinguished ministers, among whom were Edward, Peter, and Jacob Andrews, Ann Gaunt, Lydia and Hannah Wright, Ann Willis, Daniel Parker, and Rhoda Lamb.

In the closing years of the 19th century, due to the changing demography, the Meeting's membership and attendance drastically declined. The Meeting was laid down in 1907 and the property was placed under the care of Burlington Monthly Meeting. The late J. Henry Bartlett, former Headmaster of Friends Select School, summered in an old family home nearby and gave the Meeting his devoted care throughout his life, as did the late Paul Bartlett.

From 1907 until 1986 the Meetinghouse was open for Meetings for Worship each First Day during Seventh and Eighth Months. Beginning in 1986 Meetings for Worship were held each First Day throughout the year and Little Egg Harbor was re-established as a Monthly Meeting by Burlington Quarterly Meeting on Fifth Month 3rd, 1986. Meetings for Worship are now held each First Day at 10:30 AM.

"But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

—Matthew 6:33-34

Developed by the Field Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.