



**The Religious Society  
of Friends (Quakers) —  
An Introduction**

by Margaret Springer

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Waterloo, Ontario  
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It is the fall of 1972. We've already driven around the block, but now we're sure this is the right house. There are other cars pulling up outside, and people talking on the lawn. As we get out, someone comes to us with hand outstretched and introduces himself. We all walk around to the back, the children clinging. I notice with some relief that people are dressed rather casually. We settle ourselves into an assortment of garden furniture, arranged amid wobbles and squeaks in a circle. And then we sit silently together.

At first I am most aware of the beauty of this place. The warmth and sunshine of a glorious fall day; the dappled shade in which we sit. I hear the rustle of leaves, the sound of neighbours discussing their garden, a screen door banging, and the far-off shouts of children at play. But gradually the silence deepens. I am less aware of my surroundings. I hardly notice when someone rises and beckons to the children. A shuffle of feet on the grass. A murmur of voices. Time seems suspended.

Then, someone speaks, about looking for God in our lives. Again there is silence. Sometimes I sense a feeling of deep peace and timelessness, and catch a glimpse of a profoundly moving religious experience, of God in our midst. At other times I am too aware of the distractions, and of the length of the silence. Another person speaks, about what being in this group has meant to him. More silence. Then suddenly the hour has passed. We are all shaking hands with those on

each side of us, introducing ourselves, talking, stretching, collecting the children, or going to the kitchen to start lunch. The spell has broken. My first Quaker Meeting for Worship is over.

If you've already been to a Quaker Meeting, much of this will be familiar to you. You might have been indoors instead of out, or at a Meeting House instead of a home, but I suspect that the emotional impact of that first experience was similar, and has stayed with you, as it has with me. If you have not experienced a Quaker Meeting, perhaps this has given you some idea of how it might feel.

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Who are the Quakers? What do they stand for? How do they operate? Officially we are called the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Unofficially, we call ourselves either Quakers or Friends. To begin with, we are a *religious* society.

Stephen Leacock once wrote wryly: 'Anybody can start a movement by beginning with himself.' George Fox did just that. His place and time was England in the mid-17th century. He grew up surrounded by social and political ferment, and besieged within by religious unrest. He was a deeply committed Christian, who did not intend to start a movement, a sect, or a church. But he attracted followers as other seekers heard his ideas.

What were those ideas? Simple but radical. A human being can have direct communion with God, without the intervention of another human being (a minister), an institution (the church), or a book (the Bible). Ordinary people can sit together anywhere in silent worship, without clergy, liturgy, or sacraments (all of life is sacred). There we can feel a Presence and listen for the

voice of God in our own lives. We are seekers of Truth, and that Truth is based on direct experience. Each of us has 'that of God' within us—the indwelling spirit of Christ, the Light within—which links us to God and to each other. Rank, race, religion, political persuasion, all these things become unimportant. We are equal, and can speak to 'that of God' in others.

All of this got George Fox and his friends into a lot of trouble. The implications of these ideas were—and still are—far-reaching. The concept of 'that of God within', for example, meant that Friends would not bear arms against another person, or pay tithes to help support armies. George Fox once wrote that he 'lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars'. The early Quakers acted on the premise that love will work as a way of life, and championed the cause of the less fortunate. Their sensitivity to the plight of the poor, imprisoned and oppressed made them tireless workers for justice and equality.

Equality was an important issue. In those days the custom was to take off one's hat, and bow, and use the respectful 'you,' instead of the familiar 'thee/thou,' with those of higher social rank. This Quakers refused to do. Nor would they use titles in addressing or referring to others. Rich, poor, old, young, men, women, educated, uneducated, privileged, oppressed—all were treated equally and simply called by their full or first names. And there was an emphasis on simplicity and plainness of speech and dress, which became rigidly entrenched as time went on.

Not only did early Quakers reject the established church and ministry, they also actively stirred people against it, and were often arrested for interrupting sermons or causing disturbances in village squares.

When brought to court, they refused to swear oaths on the Bible, stating firmly that there are not two standards of truth, and following literally the Biblical commandment to 'swear not at all'.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the authorities considered Quakers dangerous heretics, and imprisoned many of them. George Fox himself was in prison many times. But always on his release he travelled around the country again with his fervour undiminished. He even visited Friends in Barbados, Jamaica, and the American colonies late in his life.

Today the 'testimonies' of those early Friends are still at the centre of Quaker work and witness. To begin with, the tradition of pacifism remains. In times of war, some Friends have taken non-combative roles such as in Friends' Ambulance Units, and others of us have gone to jail for refusing to accept the draft. In our social concerns we have continued to work with unpopular causes. Whether sending medical aid to all sides during the Vietnam War, taking a stand against capital punishment, working toward the abolition of prisons, questioning the implications of nuclear energy, or championing the rights of native people, we find as much to commit ourselves to now as 300 years ago. And these actions arise from the same religious convictions.

We still do not use titles. We still espouse simplicity, though we no longer dress differently than anyone else. And we 'affirm' rather than take an oath in court. But perhaps we have mellowed, and the authorities have mellowed, for we no longer seem to be so often put in jail.

Today Friends co-operate with other religious groups, especially in working on common social concerns, and we hold membership in the Canadian Council of

Churches. We in Canadian Yearly Meeting still do not go to church or have a paid ministry. But we do pay some attention to the ministry of others, to the teachings of other religious groups, and to recorded religious experiences, biblical or otherwise. Our own experience is basic, but in our search for Truth we accept insights from many sources.

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We call ourselves a religious society. When I first read about Quakers, that word 'society' troubled me. It sounded exclusive, private, and somewhat snobbish. But the word was used from the beginning simply to avoid the connotations of the word 'church'. The last of six definitions of 'society' in my dictionary says: 'association of persons united by a common aim or interest or principle, e.g. Society of Friends, Quakers.' The word also reminds us that we have an organised structure, a structure developed by the early Friends and still in use today.

The most important unit of our Quaker structure is the Monthly Meeting. This is a group of members in one locality who meet every week for worship, and every month for business. One person is chosen as Clerk, to preside over Business Meetings and to facilitate the work of the Meeting. There are other officers and subcommittees, depending on the size and interest of the Meeting. These may deal with Finance, Property, Ministry and Counsel (pastoral oversight of members), First Day School, Library, or current social concerns.

No vote is taken at a Quaker Business Meeting. It is a religious Meeting—a Meeting for Worship for Business. After a person has spoken, there is silence. We try not to interrupt each other, or jump in too quickly with our

own ideas, or speak more than once on the same topic. We work towards agreeing on 'the sense of the Meeting,' which the presiding Clerk formulates and which is written down as a Minute. On the surface, this is the conduct of business by consensus. But what we are really trying to do is listen together for God's guidance.

What if we cannot reach agreement? Then the matter is either laid down, or laid over to the next Meeting. Yes, this can be a slow way of doing things (a friend wrote to me recently: 'Quakers are not slow; they move as do turtles and snails'). But when we all know that this is the system, we feel our individual responsibility to help things go forward. To make things happen, we have to put in the effort of really listening to each other, and search for that of God within ourselves.

This is surprisingly hard work. Of course, there are times when meetings drag on because we are not prepared, or not listening, or not centered on God's will. But in a Meeting for Business at its best you can see our witness to Friends' testimonies being translated into action, with love and care and humility. And that is an exciting spiritual experience.

It is at a Quaker Meeting for Business, by the way, that you will hear the delightful expressions that have stayed with us from earlier days: 'I am not easy with . . .'; 'We must walk in the Light'; 'Way will open'; 'That Friend speaks my mind.' These, and the habit still used by some of numbering the months and days of the week to avoid their 'pagan' names (hence, First Day School for Sunday School), are about all that is left of the traditional plain speech. But an emphasis on truthful speech remains.

How do Monthly Meetings start? When there is a nucleus of Friends meeting regularly for Worship in a

new area, an 'Allowed Meeting' is formed, usually under the care of the closest Monthly Meeting. In time, this can become a Monthly Meeting in its own right. But some Friends remain geographically isolated, and unless they can reach out and start their own worship groups, they remain cut off from personal contact with other Friends. This is a particular problem here in Canada, where a couple of thousand members and attenders are strung out across this vast land like an assortment of beads on a rather fragile thread.

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The first Quakers in Canada came from the American colonies in the late 18th century. They settled in the Maritimes, and in many counties of what is now southern and south-eastern Ontario. More Friends came from Britain in the 19th century, and by the 1870's there were 7000 Quakers in Canada, mostly in rural areas of Ontario. Then our numbers declined. We were weakened by schisms that divided rival Quaker groups, by evangelical revivals that wooed many away, and by the fact that the close pioneer communities began to be diffused as the shift to urban centres began.

In this century, Friends have tended to be urban, educated, and middle-class. Most of our members are 'convinced' Friends (added by request), rather than 'birthright' Friends (born to Quaker parents). Since World War II, Quakers have come to Canada from many countries, especially the United States and Britain. New groups have appeared in Western and Eastern centres. During the Vietnam War we welcomed some American Friends who left their home-land in their anguish over the U.S. involvement in South-East Asia.

In December 1976 (the latest figures I have), there were 1105 Quakers in Canada, holding their membership in 25 different Meetings. Sixty-two percent of these people were in Ontario, twenty-six percent were in the West, seven percent were in Quebec and five percent were in the Atlantic provinces. But you know how it is with statistics. For one thing, this is a count of *members*, and most Meetings have a number of regular 'attenders' as well. Also while Toronto Monthly Meeting had the largest number of members (252), undoubtedly Argenta, a Quaker school and community in British Columbia, had the most members (40) of any other community in Canada on a per capita basis. It is easy to play games with numbers.

Monthly Meetings in Canada are also constituent parts of a Quarterly or Half-Yearly and of Canadian Yearly Meeting. Once every Spring and Fall, for example, my Meeting (Kitchener, Ont.) gets together with four other Meetings in Ontario to meet as Yonge Street Half-Yearly Meeting. There is worship, business, some sort of programme, and Friendly fellowship. Then, in the summer, we all have the opportunity to meet with Friends from across Canada for the week-long sessions of Canadian Yearly Meeting, the location varying each year. Canadian Yearly Meeting maintains a year-round office in Toronto, which provides the thread that links our Meeting beads together.

Since I first began to hear of Canadian Yearly Meeting and its subcommittees, and of our affiliations with Friend's groups in other parts of the world, I've been puzzled and amused by the number of acronyms bandied about. One sentence definitions do none of them justice, but here are some of the acronyms most often heard:

**CYM**—Canadian Yearly Meeting. Formed in 1955 when Friends from three different Yearly Meetings in Canada united into one body.

**CFSC**—Canadian Friends Service Committee. Since 1931 this committee has acted on Friends' peace and social concerns, nationally and internationally.

**HMAC**—Home Mission and Advancement Committee. The CYM Committee responsible for such things as the nurture of Meetings and worship groups, the provision of literature, and the publication of the *Canadian Friend* magazine.

**QCNC**—Quaker Committee for Native Concerns. A working group of CFSC concerned with the rights of Canada's native people.

**QCJJ**—Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice. Another sub-group, dedicated to the abolition of prisons.

**FGC** and **FUM**—Friends General Conference (Philadelphia) and Friends United Meeting (Richmond, Indiana). Two associations of Yearly Meetings in North America; CYM is affiliated with both.

**WQF**—Wider Quaker Fellowship. An organization for 'friends of Friends'; those who wish to associate themselves with Quakers without the full ties of membership.

**FWCC**—Friends World Committee for Consultation. A worldwide fellowship of Friends, which holds a gathering every third year in different parts of the world.

At the end of this pamphlet I've given a list of Quaker Meetings and worship groups in Canada. Such a list is constantly changing. If there is no established group listed in your area, there may well be isolated Friends not too far away who would welcome contact with you, or Friends in another Meeting who would be glad to

correspond. Write to Canadian Yearly Meeting office (60 Lowther Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M5R 1C7) for up-to-date information.

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We are a Religious Society of Friends. That has a comforting ring to it, and we do try to be both Friends of the Truth and friends to others. At larger Quaker gatherings and at programmes of Camp Neekaunis (on Georgian Bay, Ontario); in Young Friends activities and at Argenta Friends School; at Yearly Meeting Committees and in our individual Meetings, we cherish a sense of being part of a loving and supportive spiritual community: this we depend on for the strength to reach out and witness, regardless of our small numbers.

What are we like as people? If you've already been to a Meeting, or been associated with Friends, you probably have your own opinion! My own first impressions were of warmth, acceptance, and gentle good humour. As I've come to know Friends better, I haven't changed that opinion, but I've decided that we also tend to be rather individualistic and colourful characters. We put a great deal of emphasis on individual responsibility—necessary in a lay society. While silent worship is at the centre of our collective behavior, we can also make a chattering din outside those hallowed hours. We are loving and accepting of many kinds of people (even, most of the time, of each other), and of many kinds of diverse causes.

There's a popular T-shirt currently available, imprinted with the words 'I am a Friend'. And I have a photograph in my mind, of all the Quakers I know—alas, they could fit into one picture—each wearing one of

those T-shirts. Then you could see what an assortment of people we are—of many shapes and sizes, of all ages, and from many different backgrounds. But what we really have in common is not something we wear, but something we do. We try to seek Truth, and act upon it.

You may find that our way is not for you. But if you've read this far, by now at least you know something about us, and will be less likely to confuse us with Puritans, Philadelphia, oats and motor oil. Recently I was involved with a survey which asked Friends this question (among others): If you had one thing to tell a new attender or enquirer, what would that be? The replies were of three kinds. First, don't expect us to be perfect. Second, relax. Third, go to more than one Meeting for Worship in more than one place. All this is good advice. But one person gave a succinct one-word answer, which reminded me of the acceptance I felt at that first Meeting for Worship described earlier. I will leave it with you, whether or not you choose to continue your spiritual journey with us. That one word is : Welcome!

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## MEETINGS AND WORSHIP GROUPS IN CANADA

British Columbia: Argenta, Nelson, Vancouver, Vernon, Victoria.

Alberta: Calgary, Edmonton.

Saskatchewan: Regina, Saskatoon.

Manitoba: Brandon, Winnipeg.

Ontario: Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, Lobo (Coldstream), London, Newmarket, Niagara Falls, Norwich, Ottawa, Pelham, Peterborough, Simcoe-Muskoka, Sparta, Thousand Islands, Toronto, Welland, Wellington, West Lake, Wooler, Yonge Street.

Quebec: Montreal.

Nova Scotia: Halifax.

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## FOR FURTHER READING . . .

### *Quakerism in general:*

Hubbard, Geoffrey. *Quaker by conviction*. 254p. (Harmondsworth, England, Penguin Books, 1974)

Gorman, George. *Introducing Quakers*. 80p. (London, England, Friends Home Service Committee, 2d ed, 1974)

### *Our religious heritage:*

*Journal of George Fox*, ed. by John Nickalls. 789p. (London Yearly Meeting, 1952, repr. 1975)

*Christian faith and practice in the experience of the Society of Friends*. 396p. (London Yearly Meeting, 1960)

## Canadian Quaker history:

Dorland, Arthur Garratt. *The Quakers in Canada, a history*. 360p. (Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1968)

Haslam, Fred. *A record of experience with Canadian Friends (Quakers) and the Canadian ecumenical movement, 1921-1967*. 131p.

## Quakerism in Canada today:

Canadian Yearly Meeting. *Organization and procedure*. (Toronto, 1969)

Canadian Friend magazine, editor: Dorothy Chapman. (Argenta Friends School Press, 6 issues per year)

**Note:** A literature service formerly operated by CYM Home Mission and Advancement Committee is expected to be revived soon. You might also write to the following for their catalogues:

Friends Book Centre, Friends House, London, England, NW1 2BJ.

Friends General Conference, 1520B Race Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102, U.S.A.

Friends United Press, 101 Quaker Hill Drive, Richmond, Ind. 47374, U.S.A.

Friends World Committee, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102, U.S.A.

Pendle Hill Publications, Wallingford, Pa. 19086, U.S.A.

## QUAKER BOOK SERVICE

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