



A Friendly Letter

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Tenth Month, 1983

Dear Friend,

As I write, our nation has again gone to war, or rather wars. It is too soon, too overwhelming to react thoughtfully yet. But there seems little doubt that the costly part of the Quaker Peace Testimony, a willingness and necessity to suffer in the cause of protest against the foolish and bloody adventures of governments, will shortly be felt widely among us. As that develops, it is my prayer that Friends will not lose sight of the necessity of the crucial, central importance of a deep and constantly renewed worship life, both individual and corporate, as the basis of our outward witness. Friends, let us pray--and act.

In the meantime, other parts of life go on, however incongruously against the backdrop of bombs and marine landings. One such item is a new addition with this issue: the number in the middle of the lines above. It is an International Standard Serials Number. It means that, if we don't blow ourselves up, this journal will be identifiable through the Library of Congress. It makes me feel a bit more established.

In addition, the holiday season is coming on, which brings up two items: first, a plea for you to consider giving subscriptions to *A Friendly Letter* as gifts. To make this more attractive, this year I am offering givers your choice of any three back issues, selected from the enclosed list, with each gift sub. Simply check off your choices and include the form with your order. I especially hope Friends will consider ordering it for your meeting or church library.

The other seasonal item has to do with my habit of nominating, in the next First Month issue, a Quaker or Quakers of the Year. Let me jog you into a moment of reflection: who do you think would qualify for such a distinction this time around? If a name or two surfaces, will you take a moment to jot a note about him/her/them and pass it along to me? Thank thee.

One final note: in Issue #28 (7/83) I sketched a number of theological viewpoints among unprogrammed Friends, one of which I called PANists, for Pagans, Aquarians and New Age Friends. Among these, I mentioned some feminist-oriented Friends who have adopted a form of witchcraft. Friends interested in this perspective should check out the 10/21 issue of *Christianity Today*. This issue of the Evangelical fortnightly contains a very thoughtful and dispassionate description of this movement, by a person who studied them for some years. The article also shows sensitivity to why this group is so resistant to a judgmental, particularistic attitude on the part of more orthodox religionists. I admit I was surprised to find such a careful, empathetic piece in this strongly Christian publication; so much for my prejudices. The article should help others with their biases as well.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

AMERICAN QUAKERS: FINDING A NEW MAINSTREAM?

Where is American Quakerdom headed in the 1980s? Is it even possible, considering the variety among us, to pose such a question in a meaningful way, much less answer it? These queries have been much on my mind as I have visited, studied and talked with Friends in various places during the past few years. Recently, the beginning of an answer has been taking shape, which it now seems useful to lay out for others to see and react to. This answer is, to be sure, more of an elaborate hunch than an example of concrete, factual reporting. It is an effort to infer and forecast trends from scattered data, much the way a meteorologist predicts the weather--a process subject to the same uncertainties! Nonetheless, here goes:

The first development that should be mentioned in this connection is the possible reintegration of Conservative Quakerism with the Society at large, by way of Friends General Conference. I recently learned, for example, that Ohio Conservative YM has considered several proposals to affiliate with FGC, and that each time it has come up the suggestion has moved closer to acceptance. No doubt there still remain, as is often the case with such things, several funerals between Ohio YM and FGC. But weighty members of that body have told me they regard such a move as inevitable.

The Value of a Conservative Comeback

I think those Friends are right, and feel also that it will be a great day for Friends when such a reintegration comes about. Conservative Quakerism's least attractive features have been its standoffishness and righteous isolationism. These have also resulted in its present reduced state, down to three YMs of only a few hundred members each, bodies that seem all but certain to wither away completely if kept apart from the larger body much longer. Yet at the same time, these Wilburite Friends have in my judgment preserved in the midst of their isolation a very precious chunk of the essence of Quaker faith, particularly the combination of a serious Christian commitment with the practice of what they call the "free gospel ministry," a procession of truly Spirit-led, nonprofessional ministers rooted in the traditional unprogrammed Quaker ways. Liberal Friends have much to learn from the best of Wilburism; and my guess is that it would be much more likely to leave its mark on FGC-style Quakerism than to be simply swallowed up in it without a trace.

Indeed, over the past three summers, while attending FGC's annual gatherings, my conviction has grown that this body is probably now the most open of any to learning from the various Quaker traditions. This has not always been the case; there are few people more narrow-minded, even intolerant, than some officially "liberal" Friends. (In my experience, however, such an outlook has cropped up most frequently in the unaffiliated YMs, and has left them largely on the margins of the evolution being outlined here.) I have heard the variety found at FGC's gatherings derided as "smorgasboard Quakerism." The description is accurate, but the derision seems to me misplaced. What, after all, is so bad about a smorgasboard? But more important, FGC has become more than just an aggregation of interest groups. There has also developed within that constituency a very real, and hard-won, sense of community. That community seems to me to have a definite spiritual quality, of the sort implied by the Biblical terms *ecclesia* and *koinonia*. The result in recent years has been an atmosphere of tremendous vitality, which seems to me to portend tremendous potential for growth and witness. The recent organizational crisis through which the FGC structure has passed appears to be resulting in a staff and committee cadre able to assist this growth in a meaningful way.

The Surprising Decline of EFA

The same cannot be said of the Evangelical Friends Alliance. Indeed, over the past year, the organizational structure and programs of EFA have been considerably scaled back, or even eliminated. For instance, the group has abandoned plans for any further national gatherings, of the sort held most recently at Malone College in Ohio in 1981; further, its various commissions have now been laid down, and its executive committee sessions were last held in considerably simpler circumstances than heretofore. Indeed, from the outside it begins to look as if, except for publishing *The Evangelical Friend*, and a few other small projects, EFA no longer has much to do.

Exactly why this has come about is not easy to pinpoint. Certainly it is not because of any decline in Evangelical Quakerism. Many of those churches and YMs are thriving, and with their emphasis on missions and evangelism, growing apace. My guess, however, is that the decline of EFA has had more to do with the institutional individualism of evangelical religion in general. Quakers are individualistic already, yet there seems to be in Evangelicalism a kind of centrifugal force that pulls yearly meetings, and even individual churches within them, away from organizational centers into their own pursuits. This is true not only of Friends but of evangelical groups in general.

It is also the case that, despite the liberal Quaker tendency to lump all Evangelicals together into an undifferentiated Bible-waving mass, the Evangelical YMs are actually quite different from each other. Perhaps the sharpest contrast would show up between the Evangelical Friends Church-Eastern Region and Northwest YM: in Eastern Region some churches perform baptisms and have communion, and pacifist sentiment is rare; in Northwest, Quaker pacifism has always been strong, and the YM has a strong aversion to the "outward ordinances." These differences, among others, have apparently made the task of finding a basis for sustained common endeavor among the various Evangelical YMs very difficult, at least through EFA.

Friends United Meeting and the Uneasy Center

So what is to become of the EFA YMs? I have heard a prominent member of Northwest reflect aloud that that body has more in common with some Friends United Meeting YMs than with some Evangelical groups. So it appears that there is something of a pull, in that group at least, back toward the Quaker affiliation it abandoned almost sixty years ago.

This possibility, unlikely as it may be for the near-term, must still be a tantalizing one for the more forward-looking Evangelical Friends. Most of those I have talked with have little interest in the liberal-baiting and righteous isolationism of their fundamentalist brethren. They are prepared to continue, and enjoy contacts with other sorts of Friends, strange as we occasionally seem to them; a scattering of their churches are rediscovering such Quaker traditions as silent worship; and pacifism is turning up in some unexpected places. For such people, and many of their churches, FUM would seem to offer the logical Quaker umbrella under which to nestle: it is largely pastoral and friendly to missions; furthermore, it has over the years developed a structure carefully honed to minimize abrasions to delicate Evangelical sensibilities. (For instance, while FUM is affiliated with the National Council of Churches, it makes its membership payments to this body only on the basis of a special individual solicitation, so that member groups which don't like the NCC can be assured that none of their organizational contributions to FUM are finding their way into the NCC's tainted coffers.)

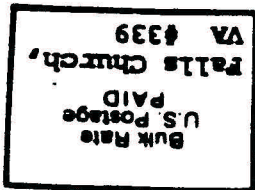
FUM, FGC and the Emerging Center

Yet there is a big hurdle standing between interested Evangelicals and FUM. It is essentially the same issue over which they left FUM in the first place: pluralism. FUM is now, even more than it was then, a mixed bag of Quakers, including some who would not call themselves Christian. Moreover, FUM now appears to be, after long hesitation and evasion, on the verge of a clear recognition of this diversity in its constituency. Part of this recognition involves ever stronger and more cordial relations between it and FGC, especially at the staff level, but also at a more rank-and-file level.

As FUM's change to recognized pluralism comes about, however, it seems likely that there will be fallout at the margins. There are YMs in FUM which may want to reexamine their affiliation once this new stance becomes clear; some meetings may do the same. FUM-inclined Evangelicals will also have to confront this issue, or return to their old isolation.

What does all this prognostication add up to? I see in it the initial emergence of a broad new Quaker mainstream in America, that will extend from Wilburite-influenced FGC and unaffiliated Friends at one end to sophisticated Evangelicals at the other. The character of this mainstream will be difficult to reduce to a written formula, which is perhaps fitting, considering that it will be a Quaker phenomenon. But those within it will learn to recognize each other, and I believe that it is to them that American Quakerism's future belongs.

INSIDE: CHARTING A NEW MAINSTREAM
IN AMERICAN QUAKERISM



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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

Tenth Month has been, perhaps fatefully, a deadly month for Friends. In 1659 two of the first generation of Quakers, Marmaduke Stephenson and William Robinson, were hung on Boston Common on 10/27. John Woolman died of smallpox during a 1772 visit to England, on 10/7; and James Nayler was beaten to death by robbers late this month in 1656. In 1690, Robert Barclay, our premier early theologian, passed away on 10/3; and in 1845, on 10/12, it was the turn of the great prison visitor and reformer, Elizabeth Fry.

However, I am moved, perhaps by the lateness with which this issue is being sent out, to creep ahead and peek into Eleventh Month's history for a moment, much of which has a similarly somber cast. I have written elsewhere about what I call the Quaker-Catholic connection, an ongoing series of spontaneous encounters between activists in both dissimilar denominations. In 1965 there was an early, searing example of it: on 11/3 a Quaker from Baltimore named Norman Morrison went quietly to the Pentagon in Washington and burned himself to death in protest of our rapidly escalating Vietnam war. A week later, Roger Laporte, a Catholic, repeated this act of immolation, to the same end, before the United Nations in New York. Such acts seemed crazy to most of us then; but I am told that the Vietnamese regarded these men as some sort of saints. And I am also told by Baltimore Friends who knew him that whatever else might be said of him, Norman Morrison was not crazy.

QUAKER CHUCKLE

Guarded speech

From Dennis Dick of Minnesota comes the following story, said to be true: There is a plain-garbed group of Conservative Friends in Harrisonburg, Virginia, living in a region well-salted with other plain-dressed church folk: Mennonites, German Baptists and, of course, Amish. In these groups, the women typically wear a small bonnet, in keeping with Paul's injunction in First Corinthians 11:10. One day one of the plain Friends was found standing in a feed store beside an old Mennonite farmer. The Mennonite looked him over carefully, then asked, "Who do you worship with?" "The Quakers," came the laconic reply. "Oh, yes, hm, good," the Mennonite elder allowed. After a short pause he asked, "Do you meet in homes?" "Yes, we do," was the reply, as the Harrisonburg Friends did not have their own meetinghouse. There was another pause, then the old farmer asked what was clearly the key question: "Are your women covered?" The Quaker considered a moment, then answered simply, "mostly."