

Brief History of Lancaster Friends Meeting

In 1681, some 30 years after the founding of the Religious Society of Friends, King Charles II agreed to grant William Penn a sizeable tract of land west of the Delaware River, in repayment for a debt owed by the King to the estate of Penn's father. This was the beginning of Penn's "Holy Experiment:" a colony founded on freedom of conscience and religious liberty. Pennsylvania quickly became a haven not only for Quakers, but other persecuted religious minorities as well.

Quakers were among the earliest settlers in Lancaster County, with records of land in present-day Sadsbury Township deeded by William Penn himself to one John Kennerly in 1691. However, their numbers were quickly eclipsed by German-speaking Mennonites, who first settled in Willow Street, beginning around 1711. By the mid-1700's, there were Friends Meetings in Sadsbury, Columbia, East Lampeter, Lancaster city, Bart, Little Britain (Penn Hill), Eastland, and Drumore. The Meeting in Lancaster city dates to 1753, with a Meeting House built in 1755 on the east side of South Queen Street (near the present day Salvation Army). However, the Meeting declined in numbers after the War of Independence, and was laid down in the early 19th century. Throughout the rest of the county, however, other Friends Meetings continued to flourish, and individual Quakers made notable contributions to the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railway.

After a hiatus of 120 years, a small group of Friends began to meet for worship in the 1940's, first in private homes, then at the Lancaster Theological Seminary, and finally for several years at the YWCA. By 1947, they were ready to apply for monthly meeting status, and this was granted on December 7, 1947. Lancaster Friends Meeting was from the beginning recognized by both the Race Street and Arch Street Philadelphia Yearly Meetings (Hicksite and Orthodox), which give Lancaster Meeting the distinction of being one of the first united meetings in the area. (The two yearly meetings reunited in 1955.)

As the Meeting grew, a first day school was added (beginning in 1949), and there arose a desire to have our own Meetinghouse. Eventually, land on the west side of Tulane Terrace was donated by new member Harry Haverstick, and member Robert Coppock agreed to act as contractor. Ground breaking was held in July of 1954. The dedication and first meeting for worship was held on January 30, 1955, with 150 local and visiting Friends in attendance. The cost of the original construction was \$25,000, and the mortgage was paid off within four years. Neighboring Friends Meetings donated benches for the new Meeting house, some of which may be as much as 200 years old. The original 1955 building included the present worship room and library.

By 1964, there were 91 members, including 37 children, and the meeting recognized the need for added space to accommodate children's activities. The classroom addition (6 classrooms, designed to have the external appearance of a carriage house) was completed in November 1966, at a cost of \$45,000. Renovations in 1994 resulted in the current configuration of the gathering room and two entrances.

In December of 1997, Lancaster Friends Meeting celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its founding. Also in that year, Friends began to recognize a need for more space to accommodate growing numbers. After a two year process of discernment (led by clerk Nancy Bieber, Wilbur Forwood of the Building Committee, and Philip

Johnston, architect), in September 1999 we approved the addition of a new multipurpose community room and kitchen, contingent on successful fund raising. Over the next few months, \$500,000 was raised, and groundbreaking was held on July 10, 2000. The dedication of the new wing was held on May 20, 2001.

Over the years, Lancaster Friends have found a variety of ways to express our Quaker testimonies through involvement in the local community. Some of these activities have been officially sponsored by the meeting, while others have been the result of the initiative of individual members. What follows is only a partial listing of such activities.

One of the earliest meeting projects was the sponsoring of work camps to help rehabilitate urban housing, first in Lancaster (1946-51), and later in Philadelphia with David Ritchie of PYM. Concern for fair housing also led several Friends to found Opportunity Housing, Inc., which from 1966-78 purchased housing for rental to minority families, thus helping to break a pattern of racial segregation in city housing.

From 1967 to 1971, many members faithfully participated in a weekly silent vigil against the Vietnam War on Penn Square. That tradition continues with Friends' involvement in a weekly vigil against the Iraq war, held on the Courthouse steps each Saturday morning from 11 to 12.

Lancaster Friends have also had a concern for those displaced by war. Meeting sponsored and helped resettle two Vietnamese families (in 1977 and 1977). In 1995-96, Meeting sponsored the Toporan family from Bosnia, through Tressler-Lutheran Immigration Services. In 2006, Meeting likewise sponsored a Meskhetian Turkish refugee family from the former Soviet Union. Several meeting members were active in assisting Central American refugees toward Canada during the 1980s, though the Lancaster Interreligious Network for Central American Refugee Action (LINCARA).

Friends have been involved in the Quaker-inspired Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) since at least 1993, with many members participating in trainings over the years. In 1994, Cindy Herr spent a month in Elektrostal, Russia teaching AVP workshops, and in 1996 June Lang took AVP to her native Zimbabwe. In recent years, Joe DiGarbo (later joined by Anne Wallace DiGarbo) helped to establish AVP in the Balkans, and Joe DiGarbo and Joe Moore traveled to Palestine in 2007 to lead the first AVP training there.

In September 2005, Lancaster Friends Meeting co-sponsored the AFSC "Eyes Wide Open" exhibit at Franklin and Marshall College, in an effort to draw public attention to the personal cost of the war in Iraq.

At our best, Quaker activism has always been grounded in a deep spirituality, and in recent years the desire for deeper spiritual experience has grown more palpable. Since 2000, Worship and Ministry has sponsored annual fall retreats on topics like discernment, gifts and leadings, centering prayer, and Quaker decision making. In 1999-2000, 12 members of Lancaster Meeting participated in the first PYM Spiritual Formation Program, and in 2004-05 we sponsored our own local spiritual formation program, with 48 members and attenders participating. The success of this inspired in subsequent years a tradition of "Friendly Eights": groups of eight which meet monthly for eight months for fellowship, a shared meal, and discussion of a common reading. Over the years, these

programs have deepened our appreciation of our own tradition, and also helped strengthened the connections among Friends.

In the fall of 2007, we embarked upon the “Deepening and Strengthening” program from PYM. Arising out of that process, we have chosen to concentrate our attention on five areas: nurturing the spiritual life of our children, welcoming newcomers, providing effective pastoral care for all, developing the next generation of Meeting’s leaders, and dealing constructively with conflict.

As of the end of 2007, Lancaster Friends Meeting has 183 members (159 adults and 24 children).

Now over 60 years old, Lancaster Friends Meeting is a growing and vital spiritual community which seeks to embody for a new day our understanding of Quaker spirituality and Quaker testimonies. We welcome all who wish to join us in that journey.

Sources:

Quakers: Origins, Families, and Beliefs in Lancaster County by Ross I. Morrison, Sr. (Masthoff Press, 2006).

A History or the Lancaster Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1947-1997.

Various Minutes and State of the Meeting Reports, 1997-2007.