IV. Historical Background

> *Friends are reminded that our Religious Society took form in times of disturbance, and that its continuing testimony has been the power of God to lead men and women out of the confusions of outward violence, inward sickness, and all other forms of self-will, however upheld by social convention.*
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> Advices, I

The Religious Society of Friends is committed to a life of obedience to God's Spirit both as individuals and as meetings. This commitment leads Friends to support much that is creative in public life, education and business. It also leads Friends to oppose practices and institutions that result in violence, oppression and exploitation in the world around us. History, however, demonstrates that Friends have not always been united in perceptions of what obedience to Spirit requires, and the Society has been beset from time to time by conflict and misunderstandings. Yet out of such conflicts, painful as they have been, the Religious Society of Friends has continued to strive for clarity in its commitment and unity in its witness.

A. Beginnings: 1652-1689

The Religious Society of Friends arose in England in the middle of the seventeenth century, a time of turbulence and change in both religion and politics. In the established Church of England, and even in dissenting churches, great emphasis was placed upon outward ceremony, the authority of the Bible and the acceptance of a formal creed. Many individuals, however, became dissatisfied with ceremonies and creeds and broke away from these churches. Singly or in small groups, they turned inward in search of a religion of personal experience and direct communion with God.

George Fox (1624-1691) was one of these seekers. As a child, he was serious and thoughtful, often pondering the Scriptures and engaging in solitary reflection. At age nineteen he decided to leave home in order to seek spiritual direction. For four years he wandered through the English Midlands and as far south as London. Though he consulted others, none could give rest to his troubled soul. Finally, Fox wrote,

> *…when all my hopes in* [Christian ministers and professors] *and in all men was 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…My desires after the Lord grew stronger, and zeal in the pure knowledge of God and of Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing.*
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> George Fox, 1647

And so, in 1647, at the age of twenty-three, George Fox began to preach a simple message: first, that his own dramatic and life-changing experience of a direct, unmediated revelation from God confirmed the possibility of a religion of personal experience and continuing revelation;

and second, that this same possibility is available to every person. From the very beginning, the distinctive Quaker beliefs and practices on ministry and worship came from an attempt to provide a setting to experience firsthand the Inward Light of Christ.

Fox's message, combined with his charismatic personality, soon attracted a group of women and men who joined him in spreading the "good news" that "Christ had come to teach His people himself." These first "publishers of Truth" believed the good news to be a revival of primitive Christianity rather than a new gospel. Gradually, Fox and his associates began to enlist others in this revival; and in 1652, Fox persuaded many of the Westmorland Seekers, a numerous and already well-established religious movement, to become Children of Light or Friends of the Light, as his followers called themselves, or Quakers, as they were called in scorn by others. Also in 1652, George Fox and Margaret Fell, with the tacit support of her husband, Judge Thomas Fell, turned Swarthmoor Hall, the Fells' home, into the headquarters for the infant Religious Society of Friends. Although the movement began as early as 1647, these two events—the absorption of the Westmorland Seekers into the Quaker movement and the establishment of a home base— warrant the choice of 1652 as the birth-time of the Religious Society of Friends.

While many religious dissenters welcomed Fox's message of the Inward Light, direct communion and continuing revelation and became Friends, there were others, committed either to the established Church of England or to dissenting movements other than the Friends, who regarded his message as unwelcome, heretical and perhaps treasonable. It was unwelcome, since Fox and some of his followers often invaded and disrupted the services of the Church of England. It was heretical, since the idea of continuing revelation displaced the church and even the Scriptures as the final authority. It was treasonable, since those who embraced Fox's message also refused to acknowledge the authority of the state (with its established church) as taking precedence over the authority of individual conscience, and consequently refused to take any oath of allegiance to the state or to pay tithes to support the established state church.

Accordingly, the meetings of Quakers were frequently disrupted by angry mobs, their meeting houses were vandalized and burned, and they were themselves subjected to imprisonment, fines and cruel treatment by officials of the state. Such persecution continued sporadically until 1689 and the so-called Glorious Revolution, when a Toleration Act was adopted that temporarily sanctioned freedom of worship for Trinitarian Protestants. (Some restrictions on rights continued, however, into the 19th century.) Yet, like the early Christian church, the Quaker movement gained more adherents despite—or because of—the persecution. While a vital and influential movement at the time, modern Quaker historians estimate that Quakers constituted less than ten percent of the British population by the end of the seventeenth century.

This combination of persecution and expansion yielded several important consequences. The Quakers' sense of themselves as a distinct people with a divine mission became stronger. Their refusal to take oaths under any circumstances, to serve in the army, to take off their hats or use the formal "you" in deference to persons in authority, and to dress like the "world's people" all date from this period. Unlike other dissenters, they insisted on holding their meetings publicly in spite of the threat of persecution, and thus became known for scrupulous honesty. The fact that Quaker merchants adopted a fixed price system significantly enhanced this reputation.

Second, though unwilling to formulate any explicit creed or profession of faith as a condition of membership, early Friends were more than willing to engage in public debate and expound their basic beliefs. Thus began the publication of numerous books and tracts intended to explain and justify Quaker principles. Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (published first in Latin in 1676 and then in English in 1678) was so theologically sophisticated and comprehensive that it became the standard account of Quaker beliefs until the middle of the 19th century. Both Margaret Fell and George Fox asserted women's right to preach, publish tracts, hold separate meetings and travel in the ministry, all controversial ideas at that time.

Third, early Friends realized that their movement required institutional structure to provide material assistance and spiritual support for those being persecuted and to nurture and discipline the individual and group life of its adherents. The system of monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings was initiated at Fox's urging to unify practice among Quakers. If Friends were to take a particular position on oaths or on the slave trade, for example, the ultimate policy was done at the yearly meeting level and thereafter it was the position of all Quakers within the yearly meeting. This system, involving both hierarchical and collective aspects, has given stability and continuity to our Religious Society. Separate men's and women's meetings for business were established. While the primary purpose of the women's meetings was to care for the poor and interview couples before marriage (along with the men's meetings), in the process women developed and exercised administrative and decision-making skills in public forums. In English common law, and in general practice, women were not granted any voice other than that of their husband.

Prior to 1660, Friends were not only engaged in sharing their "good news" with others in England, Scotland and Ireland; they also successfully spread their faith by creating meetings on the continent of Europe, and in North America and the West Indies.

Friends first came to America as early as 1656. In Massachusetts, the Quaker missionaries were imprisoned, tortured and expelled; four of them were put to death between 1659 and 1661, including Mary Dyer from Rhode Island, whose statue is near the entrance to Friends Center at 1501 Cherry Street in Philadelphia. In the more tolerant Rhode Island, however, they (along with Baptists and other dissidents) were not only permitted to proselytize but also to settle and govern for a time.

In the mid-Atlantic region, Quakers settled in 1675 near the present city of Burlington, New Jersey. In 1681, William Penn (1644-1718) arrived in the land west of the Delaware River, which Charles II had granted to Penn in payment for a sizable debt to the estate of Penn's father and which the King named "Pennsylvania" in honor of Admiral Penn. William Penn intended Pennsylvania to be a "holy experiment"—an enlightened proprietorship based on New

Testament principles and liberty of conscience where people did the will of God. Though Penn's political practice was not always consistent with his theory, the underlying principles of this Friend's utopian vision are as pertinent as ever: participatory decision making, religious liberty, justice as fair dealing with one's neighbors, opposition to war and the abolition of oaths.

B. Consolidation and Withdrawal: 1689-Circa 1800

After the adoption of the Toleration Act by the English Parliament in 1689, conditions for Quakers changed. Though occasionally persecuted, they were mostly left alone. Perhaps ironically, their missionary zeal diminished almost as soon as they won toleration. What had once been an outward looking energetic movement now took on the characteristics of a closed sect.

In Pennsylvania, the Quakers had become a minority of the population by 1720, but they retained political control of the colony until the beginning of the French and Indian Wars in 1755. At that point, a few Friends gave up their seats in the General Assembly to allow Pennsylvania to pursue the war without their support.

While most Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends opposed the American Revolution, other responses to the war varied. Some supported the revolution, became members of the Free Quaker movement, and left the yearly meeting. Others adopted neutrality as their position, refused to affirm loyalty to the new government, withdrew from politics, and refused to use paper money issued either by the state or Congress. And some actively supported the British and, of these, some even moved to Canada.

In late eighteenth century America as in England, Quakers increasingly withdrew from active public life, as well as from public office, to focus on their religious community and their distinctive way of life based on spiritual understandings. During this period yearly meetings established requirements for membership and adopted books of discipline to define more precisely the expectations for Quaker conduct and to prescribe the means of enforcing these expectations. For instance, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's 1704 *Book of Discipline* discouraged the marriage of Friends to non-Friends ("marriage out of unity"); its 1712 discipline recommended disownment of members who married "out of meeting;" and its 1722 discipline required disownment for this conduct. Before such action was taken, a committee of the monthly meeting would meet with the 'errant' Friend in an attempt to reclaim the Friend to right behavior. If that effort failed, the member would be disowned by the meeting, which meant being barred from attending meeting for business or holding office in the meeting. Such policies increased the exclusivity of the Religious Society of Friends, as did the Queries and Advices formulated to increase Friends' mindfulness of their distinctive expectations for conduct.

This period of consolidation and conformity came to be known as the Quietist Period. Still, during the 1750s, Friends actively debated war taxes, Indian rights and slavery. Even as Friends turned their energies from political matters, they advanced their public witness. Friends in 1755 essentially began the movement for abolition and during the American Revolution required all Friends to free their slaves. They also expressed concern for the humane treatment of prisoners; established a number of philanthropies benefitting Native Americans; and opposed the payment of taxes for war.

A number of reforming ministers traveled widely seeking to improve the discipline of members, to set up new meetings, to preach against slavery and other social evils and to hold public meetings. One such minister was John Woolman (1720-1770), from Mount Holly, New Jersey, who exemplified what a Quaker life could be when obedient to Spirit. He led efforts to eliminate the enslavement of people, to improve the treatment of Native Americans, to end economic exploitation and to warn against wealth and its abuses. These efforts reflect his choice of a way of life “free from the Entanglement and the Desire of outward Greatness.” After Woolman’s death, his work and his public writings increasingly influenced the social and economic commitments of the larger society of non-Quakers. Another active Philadelphia area Quaker, Anthony Benezet, was a leader in the wider anti-slavery movement, in education for African Americans, and in relief efforts to aid those affected by war.

C. Schism and Reform: Circa 1800-1900

Even before the nineteenth century, American Friends exhibited two divergent tendencies: on the one hand, emphasizing the primary authority of the Inward Light; and on the other, emphasizing such Christian tenets as atonement and bodily resurrection and also the authority of the Bible. Regarding the latter tendency, George Keith (1638-1716), one of the earliest Quaker leaders in England, formed a separatist movement in Pennsylvania in the 1690s called the Christian Quakers. This group strongly emphasized the life and teachings of the historical Jesus and attempted to change the structure of governance within monthly meetings by requiring an affirmation of faith and establishing deacons and elders to monitor the theological views of those who spoke in meetings for worship. After being rebuffed by both Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and London Yearly Meeting, this movement disappeared. Keith’s efforts in the late 17th century clearly anticipate one of the tendencies in nineteenth century American Quakerism. Nor were Friends immune to the Great Awakening of the 18th century or the evangelical movement in the 19th century.

The other tendency emphasized the Inward Light as the primary basis for religious faith and practice. Elias Hicks (1748-1830), a Quaker farmer from Long Island, became the focal point of criticism from more evangelical Quakers. He was a strong abolitionist and challenged wealthy Friends and the use of any products of slave labor. Hicks emphasized the primacy of the Inward Guide and deplored creedal statements. He urged Friends to live apart from the world and opposed public education as well as the construction of the Erie Canal and a system of railroads. Elias Hicks was not leading a movement but rather represented traditional Quaker values and commitments and was attempting to recall Friends to their roots. His opposition to the wealth and power of Friends in such cities as Philadelphia drew support from many, though some leading Philadelphia Quakers believed that his intent was to undermine their power and authority.

Hicks’ traveling ministry led to a schism in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1827. Each group claimed to represent authentic Quaker faith and practice; they were identified as “Orthodox” and “Hicksite”. Economic, geographic, kinship and governance differences were involved in this conflict, in addition to the theological issues.

Orthodox Friends in Philadelphia continued to hold their yearly meetings at the 4th and Arch Street meetinghouse (now known as Arch Street Meeting House), while Philadelphia Hicksite Friends met elsewhere. The 1827 schism was followed by similar splits in Baltimore, New York, Ohio and Indiana Yearly Meetings; and the situation was soon complicated by other strong personalities, such as Joseph John Gurney (1788-1847) and John Wilbur (1774-1856), and by other schisms. The Orthodox/Hicksite schism was further reinforced by London Yearly Meeting’s attempt to establish itself as a more evangelical Christian denomination and its rejection of Hicksite yearly meetings in North America.

Despite these differences, American Quakers made notable contributions during the nineteenth century. Friends were among those who participated in the settling of the western frontier before and after the Civil War. As holiness revivals began to occur there, many meetings hired a pastor and introduced an order of worship, including music. Primary and secondary education, always a major Quaker concern, was promoted by the establishment of a number of Quaker schools and, overcoming a long distrust of higher education, several colleges. Friends also worked for the abolition of slavery and war, for the welfare of African-Americans and Native Americans, for prison reform, for temperance, for the mentally ill, and for the rights of women. Some Quakers played a prominent role in the formation of the “underground railroad,” giving aid and shelter to people escaping slavery as they fled to northern states or Canada. And it is noteworthy that most of the organizers and officers of the first women’s rights convention at Seneca Falls in 1848 were Quakers or former Quakers. Such activities placed members of the Religious Society of Friends in conflict with many in the larger society.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, Friends from the two branches met to explore approaches to education, peace and other issues. Hicksite Friends formed the Friends General Conference to nurture and unify that branch of American Quakerism.

D. Reconciliation: Circa 1900-1955

Appropriately enough, it was the continuing commitment of both Orthodox and Hicksite Friends to the peace testimony that paved the way for their gradual reconciliation and reunification. In 1901 they jointly organized a conference for world peace to which all American Quakers were invited.

Other developments in the early 1900s contributed to the reconciliation. In 1913, a group of Philadelphia young adult Friends from each branch began to meet regularly to study the separation and issued a report the next year stating that it was not a matter of doctrine but of authority that had caused the separation. The group continued to meet and to develop social occasions for young Friends of both branches to get together; this even resulted in a few cross-branch marriages. Women from both yearly meetings also worked together on issues of suffrage and peace; Alice Paul, a member of Moorestown Friends Meeting, was a leader in the campaign to pass and ratify the 19th Amendment.

In the early 20th century, revisions to both the Orthodox and Hicksite books of discipline included significant changes: disownment essentially ended; "marriage out of unity" was no longer an issue; and, for the most part, there was no emphasis on plain style of dress. In 1916 a prominent Orthodox Friend in Philadelphia conveyed a letter of friendship from his own yearly meeting to the Hicksite Yearly Meeting. In 1917, members of both branches united with members of Five Years Meeting to organize the American Friends Service Committee to provide service opportunities for conscientious objectors in the First World War. AFSC sponsored a number of Civilian Public Service camps during World War II which enabled COs, including Friends from all yearly meetings, to pursue alternatives to military service. Quaker scholars on the faculties of Haverford and Swarthmore colleges and other universities achieved prominence beyond the Quaker domain and influenced the spread of modernism and activism. Establishment of the Friends Neighborhood Guild in 1879 (though named the Friends Mission No. 1 until 1899), Pendle Hill in 1930, Friends Council on Education in 1932, and the Friends Committee on National Legislation in 1943 also helped to form a bridge between Orthodox and Hicksite Friends. These organizations, particularly the AFSC, served to unify Friends and to develop a large cadre of Quaker leaders, including Douglas and Dorothy Steere, Howard and Anna Brinton, Rufus Jones and Henry Cadbury, who influenced Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends for decades to come.

In the 1930s and 1940s a number of committees of the two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings merged, such as a unified Peace Committee and a Religious Life Committee. The latter met for spiritual nourishment and also to prepare for visiting Friends meetings in both yearly meetings. At the same time, the disciplines of the two yearly meetings were revised in the direction of commonalities rather than differences and allowed for the formation of monthly meetings with membership in both Orthodox and Hicksite Yearly Meetings. An even more decisive step towards reconciliation was taken in 1946, when the two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings agreed to establish the Philadelphia General Meeting which would be held in the autumn and be attended by both Orthodox and Hicksite Friends, though separate sessions would continue to be held in the spring. Finally, in 1950, a committee was formed with representatives from both yearly meetings to prepare a common book of discipline. This committee submitted its work, entitled *Faith and Practice*, to both yearly meetings and to the General Meeting in 1954. The following year, a schism that had lasted for 128 years was amicably brought to an end, and a single, unified Philadelphia Yearly Meeting convened—with standing room only—at Arch Street Meeting House.

E. Unity Amidst Diversity: 1955-2000

As with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1955, Friends in Canada and in other parts of the

United States were reconciled and reunited. Friends throughout North America developed a growing interest in dialogue and cooperation. The Friends World Committee for Consultation, founded in 1937 following the Friends World Conference at Swarthmore College, encouraged this development. On the other hand, there were important differences that continued to divide Friends, both within and between the various yearly meetings, including how to respond to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement.

For instance, in 1965 members of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting attended an anti-war vigil at the Pentagon sponsored by the Interreligious Committee on Vietnam, of which Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was a member. Then, at the 1967 yearly meeting sessions, the decision was reached to support the Phoenix project to send medical supplies to North Vietnam despite the illegality of such action. The clerk of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting resigned soon thereafter, because as a sitting federal judge he was personally and officially committed to uphold the law; other Friends likewise wrestled with the question of whether civil disobedience was an appropriate method of registering opposition to the Vietnam War.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting issued a Quaker call to action in race relations following its 1964 sessions. In that call, Friends acknowledged failure to carry out the implications of the Quaker testimony of human equality and advocated various steps to promote fair housing and fair employment. During the summer of 1964, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting sponsored a project in Mississippi to rebuild churches and construct a local community center. Many Friends, however, felt that their efforts should be focused on the needs of disadvantaged minorities in their own geographic area. In 1966, Friends initiated a community project in Chester, Pennsylvania. Philadelphia area Friends thus were already attempting to respond to the urban crisis when they were presented with a demand for reparations payments.

In the summer of 1969, the Black Economic Development Conference confronted various religious groups, including Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, with the Black Manifesto and the demand that these groups pay reparations, given their complicity in the institutional arrangements that had disadvantaged African-Americans over the years. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting scheduled three called sessions in order to consider how it should respond to the Black Manifesto; members of the Black Economic Development Conference attended the third session. Though the yearly meeting decided to reject the demand for payment of reparations, it did establish a Minorities Economic Development Fund to support various community projects in the Philadelphia area, including some sponsored by the Black Economic Development Conference.

Subsequently, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting wrestled with other manifestations of the ongoing problems of race relations and war. In the spring of 1978, it attempted to establish a "Friendly presence" in West Philadelphia to encourage nonviolent resolution of the growing conflict between MOVE, a local commune, and the city of Philadelphia. And beginning in 1984, the yearly meeting became the object of government lawsuits resulting from its refusal to levy the salaries of its employees who did not pay the military portion of federal taxes.

Members of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting have confronted other social concerns. Among these have been gender roles within Friends meetings and the general society, the rights of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender individuals, the divestment of yearly meeting funds in companies with business interests in South Africa under apartheid, the Sanctuary movement for refugees in the United States without credentials, and the AIDS crisis.

In addition to public witness regarding social issues, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting gave considerable attention in the period after reunification to “putting its own house in order.” Nearly once every generation, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has asked itself variations on the fundamental questions of how our religious society should be organized so that it serves its members well and how the finances of the yearly meeting should be handled in order to use our resources most effectively. The first question was answered with decisions to change the committee structure of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in the mid-1970s, in the mid-1990s, and again in the mid-2010s. The second question was answered with the adoption of different approaches to fund raising and budgeting, including replacing the “quota” (an assessment from the yearly meeting on monthly meetings based on the number of adult members) with a voluntary “covenant” contribution determined by the monthly meetings. Over the course of these decades, the role of yearly meeting staff changed from committee support to general provision of services largely focused on core administrative functions and support of meetings.

Since reunification in 1955, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting experienced significant growth in its associated institutions. The number of Friends schools increased, including schools for children who learn differently. Several continuing care retirement communities were formed with symbolically important grants from the yearly meeting, beginning with Foulkeways in 1967, followed by Medford Leas and Kendal in the early 1970s. The Burlington Meeting House was renovated and expanded as a conference center in the 1990s for younger Friends and families. Other recent initiatives undertaken by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting include a Spiritual Formation Program; Meeting Enrichment Services that enable meetings to deepen and strengthen the quality of their corporate worship and witness; and, since 1995, residential annual sessions that are held on a college campus for several days in the summer to provide opportunities for shared worship, fellowship and business. These efforts have helped to build a greater sense of community in the yearly meeting and in many of its constituent meetings.

F. 2000–The Present

Notwithstanding efforts to improve the outreach and in reach of Friends meetings, the membership of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has declined over the years. It had some 30,000 members in 1775, but about half that number by 1925, unevenly divided between the two yearly meetings. The 1955 reunification brought together 5,537 Orthodox and 11,633 Hicksites Friends, or about 17,000. By 1994, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting had just 12,100 members. Since then, the membership has remained relatively stable with some meetings experiencing an influx of active attenders while other meetings with few and aging members continue to decline.

Though other denominations also experience declining membership, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting seems to face challenges that may be peculiar to its faith and practice. The pace of life that most individuals and families experience appears antithetical to reflective meditation practices and to regular, continuous participation in the life of a meeting. Increased mobility and evolving ideas about membership seem to create a decreased emphasis on establishing a formal and lifelong membership arrangement with a particular meeting. For some, the restrained and at times overly intellectual nature of many meetings does not provide spiritual fulfillment. For others, the Quaker culture itself, perhaps unrecognized by those formed within it, appears unwelcoming and uncongenial.

Even so, our monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings and Friends institutions continue to offer a vital experience of worship and opportunities for active service to members, and attenders. And Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is working deliberately to nurture new leadership, to articulate our faith and practice, to undo racism within the yearly meeting and the larger society, and to respond to climate change and environmental degradation. In addition, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting contributed significantly to the renovation of Friends Center at 15th and Cherry Streets in Philadelphia, which was recognized officially as a model green building. It supported the renovation of the Friends meeting house in Ramallah and the establishment of a peace center there. And in 2009, it joined other historic peace churches in sponsoring a national ecumenical conference at the meetinghouse at 4th and Arch Streets in Philadelphia, "Heeding God's Call: A Gathering on Peace." This conference included a witness for handgun violence prevention in the city of Philadelphia. We continue to recognize these and other challenges and to address them in ways that support the leadings of our vital and growing community of Friends.

We value the continuity in worship practice that has been our hallmark from the 1680s and continues to offer a radical simplicity today. We are strengthened by the sense of a gathered community as we seek and experience the Inward Light. As Friends, we remain committed to a life of obedience to the Spirit and seek to be faithful witnesses to Truth.