

Friends United Meeting and Its Identity: An Interpretative History

by

Thomas D. Hamm
Earlham College and
Indiana Yearly Meeting

Probably no Quaker entity has had a history so characterized by difference and controversy as Friends United Meeting (FUM), which was for its first sixty years the Five Years Meeting of Friends. This reflects the organization's birth in the late nineteenth century, at a time when Friends were undergoing radical change and were debating how to adapt Quakerism to the times.

The roots of difference go back to the 1820s, when the Hicksite Separation divided North American Friends. Even the nature of the issues at hand is an issue, as both sides saw themselves as upholding traditional Christian Quakerism against false Friends corrupted by outside influences, be they Presbyterian or Unitarian. The 40 percent or so who became known as Hicksites embarked on a path that, after considerable controversy, would move them into identification with liberal Christianity after 1870. The 60 percent who became known as Orthodox shared a view of the infallibility of Scripture and divinity of Christ similar to that of other evangelical Protestants.

Between 1840 and 1860 Orthodox Friends experienced a new round of divisions that took their names from leading Friends. The majority of Orthodox Friends who were comfortable moving closer to the dominant evangelical Christian culture of the United States at this time became known as Gurneyites. The primitivist opponents of such accommodation became known as Wilburites and were the forerunners of present-day Conservative Friends.

Gurneyite acculturation took a radical turn after 1870, as meetings from New England to North Carolina to Ohio and Indiana west to Oregon became swept up in a wave of revivalism. This movement, which drew largely on Wesleyan holiness doctrines, produced a revolution. Traditional ideas of plainness and worship were discarded as music and, eventually, pastoral ministry, became the norm. (Baltimore, the smallest, was the one Gurneyite yearly meeting largely unaffected.) The revivals also brought in thousands of converts and expanded Quakerism into new areas. Most Gurneyite Friends gave up the idea of Friends as a "peculiar people" and began to define their community as the larger one of evangelical Protestants.

These changes did not come without controversy. They produced separations of more conservative Friends, who eventually united with the Wilburites. In several Gurneyite yearly meetings, especially New England, New York, Western, and Indiana, an influential group of weighty Friends remained who tried to moderate the changes. They were especially resistant to attempts, after 1879, to introduce outward observance of the ordinances into Quaker worship. It was to take stock and consider the impact of all of these innovations that representatives of the Gurneyite yearly meetings, with observers from London, Dublin, and Philadelphia yearly meetings, met in Richmond, Indiana, in the fall of 1887.

The Richmond conference had two lasting consequences. One was the conclusion that it would be useful to produce a common declaration of faith. There was precedent, going back to the seventeenth century. Orthodox Friends had published such a statement in 1830, and all of the participating yearly meetings by 1887 had such declarations in their Disciplines. The resulting statement, although under the care of a large committee, was largely the work of Joseph Bevan Braithwaite of London Yearly Meeting. The conference proceedings make it clear that the declaration was intended to be a statement of conclusions that the participating yearly meetings had already reached and that it would not supersede any yearly meeting statement. Afterwards, all but one of the participating American yearly meetings accepted or endorsed it, with provisos

that it was not to be considered a creed or replace their own faith statements. The exception was Ohio, which considered it insufficiently evangelical. Significantly in London Yearly Meeting, an influential minority considered it insensitive to Quaker distinctiveness and blocked endorsement.

The second consequence came from a proposal offered by William Nicholson, the clerk of Kansas Yearly Meeting, to form a triennial conference of yearly meetings with ultimate authority and legislative powers over the participating yearly meetings. Nicholson argued that it would bring “unification, compactness, strength, solidity, power of resistance, and an effective wielding of our forces.” Many Friends hailed the proposal; others, widely divergent in theology, saw it as “revolutionary and anti-Quaker.” The yearly meetings did agree to subsequent conferences in 1892 and 1897. At the latter, delegates agreed to draft a Uniform Discipline that would form the basis for a Five Years Meeting of Friends in America. By 1901, all of the American Gurneyite yearly meetings except Ohio had accepted it. Ohio again rejected the statement as insufficiently evangelical. The first sessions of the Five Years Meeting were held in 1902.

As it emerged in 1902, the Five Years Meeting was not as strong as William Nicholson had envisioned. The Uniform Discipline did bring change, most notably common organizational structures and the abolition of birthright membership. Provision was made for the establishment of a variety of boards, of which the most consequential would be that on foreign missions. But the Five Years Meeting did not have the power to lay down or sanction a yearly meeting, other than through expulsion. And since 1887, new issues had emerged.

Since 1887, Gurneyite Friends had seen dramatic change. The most important was the emergence of Rufus Jones (1863-1948). A lifelong member of New England Yearly Meeting, Jones had gone to Philadelphia in 1893 to teach at Haverford College and edit the *Friends' Review*, which was the organ of Philadelphia Gurneyites skeptical of the revival. A year later, Jones negotiated a merger with the Midwestern Gurneyite weekly, the *Christian Worker*, and formed the *American Friend*. Jones used its pages to advocate formation of the Five Years Meeting under a Uniform Discipline. (The 1901 version was largely the work of Jones and James Wood, the long-time clerk of New York Yearly Meeting. Jones wrote the “Essential Truths” section.) Jones had also become the leader of a small but extremely influential group of Gurneyite Friends, largely associated with Haverford, Wilmington, Guilford, Earlham, Whittier, and Pacific colleges, who embraced modernist Protestantism—the Social Gospel, postmillennialism, critical study of the Bible. These modernist Friends, while emphatically Christian, were skeptical of revivalism, emphasized the love and example of the life of Christ over salvation through His Blood, and stressed progressive or continuing revelation. They also believed that the revival had eroded too many Quaker distinctive doctrines, especially the Inner Light. By 1902, their influence was such that they could prevent the incorporation of the Richmond Declaration in the Uniform Discipline. Instead, each yearly meeting was left to decide its status.

Modernism would be the center of conflict in the Five Years Meeting from its formation, and the bureaucracies and sessions of the Five Years Meeting itself would provide new settings for that conflict. While the *American Friend* was its organ, the journal's ownership was with a small group of Philadelphia Friends. While Jones published numerous articles by holiness and strongly evangelical Friends, the appearance of *any* liberal work was an issue. Attempts to censure Jones and liberal Friends at the 1907 sessions of the Five Years Meeting failed, but by 1912 the perception of crisis was acute. This led to two significant actions. The first was structural. The Five Years Meeting assumed ownership of the *American Friend* and moved it to Richmond, Indiana. The second was adoption of a statement in the 1912 sessions on the status of the Richmond Declaration:

The Five Years Meeting, having been requested in Minutes from Western, Kansas, and California Yearly Meetings to take some action that will interpret the clause in the Uniform Discipline referring to the Richmond Declaration of Faith, decides that these documents are historic statements of belief, approved by the Five Years Meeting in 1902, as expressed in the clause of Discipline referred to and approved again at this time, 1912, but they are not to be regarded as constituting a creed.

These actions did not end the controversy, as the divide between modernists of the Jones persuasion and their opponents widened between 1912 and 1922. Both sides drew on outside influences: Friends who identified with the emerging fundamentalist movement in American Protestantism founded bible colleges as alternatives to schools like Earlham and supported their own publications, such as *The Gospel Minister* and *The Evangelical Friend*. A particular grievance was the appointment in 1917 of Walter C. Woodward, an articulate modernist, as executive secretary of the Five Years Meeting and editor of the *American Friend*. Modernists continued to embrace similar movements in other denominations.

These tensions came to a head at the 1922 sessions of the Five Years Meeting. At issue was the qualifying clause in the 1912 minute that the Richmond Declaration and other statements were “not to be regarded as constituting a creed.” Critics saw it as nullifying the documents, and there had been threats of separation unless change took place. Accordingly, the Business Committee, with Rufus Jones at its head, recommended eliminating the clause as “widely misunderstood,” and submitted the following statement, which the Five Years Meeting embraced:

We recognize with profound sorrow that there is in the world today a great drift of religious unsettlement, unconcern, and unbelief. We desire at this time to call our own membership to a deeper religious life, a greater consecration of heart and will to God and a more positive loyalty to the faith for which so many of our forerunners suffered and died. We wish to reaffirm the statements and declarations of faith contained in our Uniform Discipline, viz., “The Essential Truths,” “The Declaration of Faith” issued by the Richmond Conference in 1887 and ‘George Fox’s Letter to the Governor of Barbados’ and we urge upon all our membership to refresh their minds by a careful reading of these documents which gather up and express the central truths for which we stand, now as in the past. But we would further remind our membership that our Christian faith involves more than the adoption and profession of written statements however precious they may be. It stands and lives only in free personal loyalty and devotion to a living Christ and in an inward experience of His spiritual presence and power in the soul, making the facts of our religion as real and as capable of being soundly tested as are the facts of the physical universe. May Friends everywhere bear in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus.

As Earl Redding and Tom Bodine noted in a 1974 study, while “the official action of Five Years Meeting in 1922 was to *reaffirm* the historic doctrinal statements,” it also “set the statements in the historic perspective that doctrinal statements do not hold for Friends the same sort of authority that other churches vest in creeds.”

Because the Five Years Meeting did not use the 1922 actions as a basis to remove Walter Woodward and others whom some Friends regarded as unsound, an exodus began. Oregon Yearly Meeting withdrew entirely in 1925, and several hundred fundamentalist-leaning Friends in Indiana and Western Yearly Meetings separated to form Central Yearly Meeting between 1924 and 1926. Dissatisfied members of California Yearly Meeting left Friends entirely for the same reason around 1930, and in 1937 Kansas Yearly Meeting withdrew.

By the late 1930s, interest was growing in an extensive revision of the Uniform Discipline, “to make it comply more nearly to present-day needs.” A committee was appointed in 1940. By 1945, it had produced four drafts, the last of which the Five Years Meeting submitted to the constituent yearly meetings. Five years later, it was clear that there was no unity on any doctrinal statement. So the 1950 sessions ruled that only the sections dealing with business procedures for the Five Years Meeting would go into effect, and that it was left to yearly meetings to adapt the draft to their own needs.

Two other forces pulled at the Five Years Meeting between 1945 and 1965. One was the impetus in some areas toward union or reunion of Hicksite and Orthodox meetings. This impulse went back at least thirty years. In some localities, meetings began worshiping together even while legally separate. In others, newly founded unprogrammed meetings resisted affiliation to avoid taking sides in older splits. Invariably, however, such meetings were not evangelical in theology. New England, Canadian, and New York Yearly Meetings saw several pastoral meetings become unprogrammed or leave the yearly meeting because of what they perceived as doctrinal looseness. Formal reunion of Hicksite and Orthodox came in Canadian, New York, and Baltimore

yearly meetings, affiliating them with both FGC and the Five Years Meeting. In 1960, New England Yearly Meeting affiliated with FGC as well. And in 1962, the newly formed Southeastern Yearly Meeting was founded on a dual basis. These unions brought more theologically liberal Friends into the Five Years Meeting.

The other stress came from a renewed assertiveness by strongly evangelical Friends. The first of a series of conferences, including both Friends from the independent Ohio, Oregon, and Kansas Yearly Meetings as well as many from the Five Years Meeting, was held in 1947. Increasingly, there was a perception of an alternative for pastoral Friends dissatisfied with what they saw as doctrinal vagueness and the influence of Friends from the united yearly meetings. Tensions in Nebraska Yearly Meeting were resolved only by that Five Years Meeting body setting off most of its monthly meetings into Rocky Mountain Yearly Meeting, which cut all ties with the Five Years Meeting.

Still, several observers have seen the period between 1945 and 1965 as a time of progress for the Five Years Meeting, which changed its name to Friends United Meeting in 1960 and began triennial sessions. Yearly meetings outside North America, such as East Africa and Jamaica, joined. A new headquarters was built in Richmond. Friends United Press was established. Finances were generally healthy. The center seemed to hold.

By the late 1960s, however, strains were becoming apparent. One issue was FUM's membership in the National and World Council of Churches, which served as a lightning rod for many evangelicals. The influx of convinced Friends into the dual yearly meetings drawn by antiwar activism and what they perceived as the tolerance of Friends widened the theological gap with most pastoral Friends. Another issue was the rise of a universalist outlook in the unprogrammed yearly meetings, which argued that Quakerism was not necessarily Christian. These tensions led the FUM General Board to undertake a study of the status of the Richmond Declaration in 1974. It concluded that the 1922 affirmation was still in effect, but with the qualifier that Friends recognized the limitations of written statements of faith.

By the late 1970s, a new issue had appeared, homosexuality. Generally, theologically liberal Friends were sympathetic to questioning traditional ideas about same-sex relationships. By the early 1980s, some monthly meetings with FUM affiliation were conducting same-sex unions. For others within FUM, this was an affirmation of evil and it proved extremely divisive. In 1984, for example, California Yearly Meeting threatened to withdraw as host for triennial sessions if the subject was even raised. In 1988, FUM put in place a regulation that limited employment to persons who refrained from sexual relationships outside of heterosexual marriage, which outraged many Friends.

These differences were apparent at the FUM triennial in 1987 in Greensboro, North Carolina. Southwest Yearly Meeting (it had changed its name from California) had asked the session to reaffirm the Richmond Declaration. After long debate, it was clear that there was not unity to do so, but as a compromise, the meeting endorsed what became known as the "Two O'clock Minute," which affirmed FUM's Christian identity. But tensions remained.

The response of Steve Main, then the FUM General Secretary, was to propose what became known as "Realignment." It asked, essentially, that the yearly meetings dually affiliated with FUM and FGC leave the former for the latter, and that the pastoral yearly meetings in FUM join with Evangelical Friends International in a new relationship. The FUM General Board condemned the idea, largely because Friends in Indiana, Western, Wilmington, and North Carolina recognized that many of their members would resist such a stark choice. But the General Board did commit itself to further work on issues of morality and doctrine. These meetings in 1991 and 1992 were often tense, but produced the mission statement that FUM still uses. As is often the case with compromises, it did not suit everyone. Southwest Yearly Meeting withdrew in 1993, while more liberal Friends criticized the statement as failing to reflect the range of views within FUM.

From the point of view of this historian of Quakerism, the past two decades have reflected tensions that were inevitable in an organization that has necessarily tried to embrace the full range of American Quakerism. At the extremes, Friends who see FGC or EFI as the best embodiment of the faith and practice of Friends have tried to nudge FUM as a body in their direction, not surprisingly drawing resistance. Much of FUM's appeal has rested on a sense that it represents a middle way between two extremes. But as the extremes have widened, with many EFI Friends holding on to only the most tenuous Quaker identity and many FGC Friends discarding the Christian basis of Quakerism as narrow and exclusionary, the task has become correspondingly difficult. Probably the most important development of the last decade has been the increasing role of Kenyan Friends, who now make up a majority of FUM's members. Their centrality to the 2007 reaffirmation of the Richmond Declaration may signal a fundamental turning point in FUM identity.

A Bibliography

I have drawn largely on two documents, both unpublished. One is the report on the status of the Richmond Declaration compiled by Earl Redding and Thomas Bodine in 1974 for the use of the 1975 Triennial sessions. A useful summary appeared as "Friends . . . One in the Spirit" in *Quaker Life* in October 1974. The second is a 1992 compilation by Earl Smuck, "Friends United Meeting, Past and Present." It includes a time line summarizing developments in organization, faith, missions, social concerns, evangelism, publishing, pastoral leadership, ecumenicalism, and cities.

For changes in the nineteenth century, an overview is my own *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800-1907* (Indiana University Press, 1988). Mark Minear's *Richmond 1887* (1987) is a good account of the Richmond Conference. The proceedings of the 1887 conference, including the speeches and remarks of the delegates/representatives, were published, as were those of the 1892, 1897, 1902, and 1907. From 1912 to date, only minutes have been published.

For a modernist view of developments in the first half of the twentieth century, see Rufus Jones *The Trail of Life in the Middle Years* (1934) and Elbert Russell, *Quaker: An Autobiography* (1956). For the evangelical view, see Edward Mott, *The Friends Church in the Light of Its Recent History* (1930) and *Sixty Years of Gospel Ministry* (1948).

Resources for FUM history since 1950 are less accessible and involve reading the Triennial minutes and the *American Friend* and *Quaker Life*. Especially useful is the September 1984 issue of the latter, which is devoted to "The Quaker Search for Identity." For the issues in the Realignment controversy, most of which are still current, see the 1991 Pendle Hill publication *Realignment: Nine Views among Friends*.