

25 Years of Quaker Universalism - Friends Journal:

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By [Rhoda R. Gilman](#) on August 1, 2008

In May 2008, Quaker Universalist Fellowship turned 25 years old. Many Friends would argue that what we usually call Quaker universalism is as old as the Religious Society of Friends itself and has been alive and well for 360 years, not only 25. Yet around the year 1980 there was a strong impulse among Friends on both sides of the Atlantic to reaffirm the universality of Quakerism in a world vastly different from that known by George Fox. The result was two new organizations, formed within a period of five years: Quaker Universalist Group (QUG) in the United Kingdom and Quaker Universalist Fellowship (QUF) in the United States.

The Religious Society of Friends emerged from World War II with a new generation of pacifist leadership and a global reach. A sign of this was the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded jointly to Friends Service Council of London and American Friends Service Committee in 1947. During the 1950s and 1960s, as the United States and the Soviet Union remained frozen in a balance of nuclear terror, old patterns of colonialism dissolved elsewhere in the world. New voices called for human rights, spiritual renewal, and a struggle for justice through nonviolent protest. Across Asia, Eastern faiths were reawakened both by the challenge of Western science and the hope for independence and social change.

Among Friends, a few like Teresina Havens had already been attracted by Buddhism with its close parallels to Quaker practice, and many had listened to the words of Mohandas Gandhi. Although Gandhi's voice was stilled in 1948, he was soon echoed by others like Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam and the Dalai Lama from Tibet. By 1970 popular culture in the West had been stirred, and a powerful wave of Eastern spiritual practice was sweeping through Europe and the U.S., accompanied by a renewed interest in mysticism and esoteric religion of all kinds.

There was also a counteraction. While unprogrammed Friends, like other liberal Christians, flocked to Zendos and practiced mindfulness meditation on meetinghouse benches, Friends Evangelical churches grew by leaps and bounds through missionary work in Africa and Latin America. At the same time, more traditional Friends in England and the United States defended the Christian foundations of Quakerism.

In 1977, John Linton addressed the Seekers Association in London. He had worked and worshipped for many years in India, and he spoke from his experience at New Delhi Meeting when he challenged Quakers to cut their historic ties to Christianity and fulfill their destiny as "a faith that no longer divides but unites humanity." The time was ripe, and Friends who had silently felt the same need went public in 1979 to form QUG. Three years later, U.S. Friends invited Linton to bring his message across the ocean, and in 1983, at a gathering held in London Grove meetinghouse near Philadelphia, QUF took shape.

Both groups were small and have remained so. Quakers are busy folk, and some questioned the need for yet another organization to support. In the United States QUF also faced barriers of distance and diversity, and active membership was almost by necessity concentrated in the mid-Atlantic states. For a few years QUF held semiannual lectures and workshops. Papers given at them were printed as pamphlets and mailed to a wider membership around the country, accompanied by a short newsletter. Governance was informal, since Internal Revenue Service codes did not then require incorporation for religious nonprofits, and the active members were a

small, well-acquainted group. In time, lectures were dropped or were occasionally co-sponsored with other Quaker organizations, but publishing continued.

The de facto headquarters and distribution center of QUF became the 1850 stone farmhouse of Sally Rickerman, who served as treasurer, membership clerk, printer, and sometimes editor. She also maintained outreach by mounting displays and selling pamphlets at the annual gatherings of Friends General Conference. Although the subscriber list was not over 300, pamphlets and the newsletter were mailed on their twice-yearly schedule, and in 1986 QUF produced a 100-page collection of six pamphlets originally published by QUG in Britain. Its ambitious title was *The Quaker Universalist Reader Number 1*.

A rather sleepy appearance, however, belied the group's lively intellectual presence. Differing interpretations of universalism evoked searching discussions about whether identification with the Christian history and cultural heritage of Quakerism were essential to a spiritual understanding of Quaker practice, even if not needed for "salvation." In short, are universalists of differing religious faiths truly Friends? Can Christocentric Friends be considered universalist?

Boundaries were pushed even further as Friends in various meetings became concerned about embracing Wicca or paganism and accepting nontheists. Some, who felt under suspicion at their own meetings, maintained that QUF provided them with shelter and a spiritual home; others argued that Quaker universalism by its very nature should be a unifying force, embracing all and not standing at the opposite pole from any beliefs. Two QUF pamphlets, including one by Dan Seeger, its most frequent and best-selling author, became staples of the "Quakerism 101" curriculum produced by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Less controversial over the years were essays and meditations on Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic thought, and ongoing reflections on the theme of mysticism. Universalists argue for the relationship of early Quakerism to the mystical movements of late medieval Europe, and their interest in the history of that period has led to the reprinting of two 17th-century pamphlets never before made available to modern readers: *The Light Upon the Candlestick*, 1663/1992, and *Fifty nine Particulars—To the Parliament of the Comon-Wealth of England*, 1659/2002. Also reprinted have been two studies on the militant forerunners of Quakerism in 17th-century England, written by David Boulton.

As it entered the 1990s, QUF described itself as "an informal gathering of persons who cherish the spirit of universality that has always been intrinsic to the Quaker faith. We acknowledge and respect the diverse spiritual experience of those within our own meetings as well as of the human family worldwide; we are enriched by our dialogue with all who search sincerely. We affirm the unity of God's creation."

During its second decade the communications revolution brought by computers and the Internet had a transforming effect. The first step, taken in 1995, was to start a conversation among widely scattered QUF subscribers. Until then they had been largely silent, but an e-mail list allowed them to exchange views, life stories, and experiences. Within a few months there was correspondence from Canada, Australia, Japan, England, and all corners of the United States. Some pieces were suitable for short articles, and the newsletter soon took on the character of a small journal.

A year or so later, a website was created. It went through several incarnations until in 2003 it became the main publishing arm of QUF and revitalized the e-mail discussion list with new technology. By then the physical labor of printing, folding, stuffing, and mailing the newsletter

and pamphlets, plus the hours required to keep an accurate roster of paid-up members, had outgrown the energy of a handful of aging volunteers. Meanwhile, the freedom and worldwide reach of electronic publishing promised a powerful way to spread ideas and sustain discussion. So the decision was taken to make all publications except books available without charge on the Internet and to rely on contributions from sympathetic and like-minded readers for income. The task of mounting the library of pamphlets on the Web is still going forward hand-in-hand with the production of new materials (see <http://www.universalistfriends.org>).

The growing visibility of QUF on computer screens across the world has accompanied more activity at annual FGC Gatherings. In 1996 an overflow crowd attended the QUF interest group session, and since then a weeklong series of programs has been sponsored nearly every year. A further step was taken when members decided to devote a modest legacy received in 2003 to bringing distinguished plenary speakers to the Gathering—a service that had been performed for some years by *Friends Journal*. Named in honor of Elizabeth Watson, an author and longtime spokesperson for Quaker universalism, the QUF lectureship sponsored John Shelby Spong in 2005 and Marcus Borg in 2007.

Those speakers, along with a lecture by Elaine Pagels, which QUF cosponsored with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 2006, reflect a new current within the wider world of mainstream Christianity. It has been stimulated during the past century by scholarly study of the Bible and by the rediscovery of ancient texts long excluded from the Christian canon. One spokesperson for this current, Patricia Williams, is the present editor of QUF's newsletter/journal *Universalist Friends*. She has recently been invited to membership in the Westar Institute, best known as the organization that sponsors the "Jesus Seminar," and she is the author of *Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time*, published last year in England. "All Quaker libraries might wish to have at least one copy" of this book, according to a reviewer in the March 2008 issue of the British magazine *The Friend*.

To Pat's work the QUF owes a milestone that marks the rounding out of its first 25 years. Sifting through articles published in both *Universalist Friends* and its British counterpart, the *Universalist*, Pat selected material for two additional Quaker universalist "Readers." Entitled *Universalism and Religions* and *Universalism and Spirituality*, the volumes bring together a wide range of Quaker voices from both sides of the Atlantic. Although differing greatly in the words and images they use, the authors, each in his or her own way, address the agonizing problems of 21st-century global civilization and the religious conflict that threatens to destroy it. All call for Quakerism to fulfill John Linton's vision of "a faith that no longer divides but unites humanity."