

Friends Meeting in Geneva

The first corporate Quaker presence in Geneva was a Friends Meeting for Worship in 1920. During the next fifty years, Friends met for worship in ten different places including the Institute of Education in the old city, the Palais Wilson, 5 Place de la Taconnerie, the Château Banquet, the Salle Centrale, and 12 rue Adrien Lachenal. In 1974, the premises at 13 avenue Mervelet were occupied; and with the inauguration of a new Meeting Room in 1975, the Society found a permanent home.

International group - The Meeting has always had a membership of both Swiss and internationals, mostly of American, British, French and German background, but with some Africans, Czechs, Italians, Japanese, Mexicans and others. The meeting is bilingual; at the meeting of worship, messages are given in French and/or in English.

The founder, Madeleine Savary, was an official of the International Labour Office; and throughout the years the Meeting has drawn strength from scores of men and women serving in the intergovernmental agencies or international non-governmental organisations or associated with foreign business in Geneva. The international composition of the Meeting is often strengthened by visiting Friends who make a point of stopping in Geneva because of its historic association with the peace movement.

It is not likely that a long-lasting group could have been built up by foreigners without a strong indigenous membership. A test of the durability of the group came when the foreign membership dispersed during the Second World War, and the Friends in Geneva were somewhat cut off from the larger society. Swiss Friends kept the Geneva group alive. At present, many of the members from abroad play an active role in the life of the French-speaking Quarterly Meeting and the Swiss Yearly Meeting.

Status of the Meeting - After the first unofficial meetings for worship in 1920, the participants decided to hold a monthly meeting for business and to keep records of the decisions made. The Meeting was first placed under the care of the London Yearly Meeting's Council for International Service and later of the Friends Service Council, which was technically set up as a monthly meeting of the London Yearly Meeting. In 1939 the London Yearly Meeting set up the Swiss General Meeting as a constituent meeting with authority to act as a Quarterly Meeting and as a Monthly Meeting; and Geneva was a Preparative Meeting. When the Swiss General Meeting became an independent Yearly Meeting in 1946, Geneva continued as a Preparative Meeting until it was recognized as a full Monthly Meeting in 1963.

Organisation and activities - While an overseer appeared on the scene in 1925, It was not until 1948 that the Geneva Meeting set up a full set of elders. At first, the elders named a committee of overseers; but in the fifties the overseers became a separate group named by the Meeting itself and vital to its life. The first recorder was named in 1960, and a book of members was established. The Sunday School or First Day School has been a regular feature of the Meeting except during the years of World War II. In the 1970's a social concerns committee met, and in 1980 the Social Order Committee was organised in its present form and with aims agreed upon by the Meeting. A lending library grew out of a legacy from Madeleine Savary, and librarians have been named to catalogue books in French and English and to inform members of new acquisitions. In the 1930's, the Meeting was responsible for running a Quaker Student Hostel.

If there is a persistent concern to which the Society of Friends in Geneva has been faithful, it is the concern for peace. Peace education has been a vital pursuit which has taken many forms: a study group on war and peace, lectures or films on pacifists such as Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez; talks on current international issues such as the Kellog-Briand Peace Pact, political tensions between East and West, cultural divisions between the Occident and the Orient, or options for peace in the violent Middle East. Attention has been given to the value of arbitration, voluntary service, non-violent action and disarmament as roads to peace. Education for peace was analysed in 1924, 1927, and 1928, and a sizeable study programme on the subject was set up in 1943-1944. Pacifism for journalists, women's political action for peace, peace poetry, and Quaker action for peace have been topics which focussed attention of specific contributions. Peacemakers like Edmond Privat, Elisabeth Rotten, Gilbert MacMaster, Philippe Vernier and Pierre Ceresole shared their concerns about peace with the Geneva Meeting.

Alongside the educational meetings open to Friends and their friends, a series of soul-searching Quaker meetings has been organised for clarifying ideas; the international Friends Conference in Geneva on Quaker attitudes to communism and fascism (1933), a series of meetings on the Quaker peace testimony and coercion (1934), a conference of Swiss Friends on the power of non-violence in the modern world (1935), conferences on types of pacifism leading to a Geneva memorandum on Quaker pacifism as a realizable ideal (1936), a study week at Saanen on the organisation of the post-war peace (1943), the European Quaker conference on personal responsibility for the peace testimony (1950), and examination of the pacific stance of Quakers between two power blocks (1951). Other meetings of note were a seminar on non-violence (1973), a quarterly meeting on the international vocation of Friends in French-speaking Switzerland (1975), a quarterly meeting for seeking conciliation in the energy controversy (1978), a quarterly meeting on the impact of the military on the environment (1980), a quarterly meeting on the Quaker peace testimony (1983) and a quarterly meeting on cooperation between east and west (1984).

A selected list of peace actions includes sixty years of faithful attention to the status of conscientious objectors to war and military service, and five years of attention to problems and means of protecting children from bearing military arms. One-time actions have included; a letter to the authorities of the conference on Vietnam (1954), a telegram to the "Phoenix" in the area of nuclear testing (1958), a petition asking the Swiss government to continue the Red Cross Diplomatic Conferences for protecting civilians (1960), a letter to the Disarmament Conference (1963), a letter to Catholics on the encyclical Pacem in Terris of John XXIII (1964), a letter to foreign ministers of governments of the Geneva conferences of 1954 and 1962 (1965), the establishment of a special fund for education in opposition to the war in Vietnam (1969), support for a concern that governments be encouraged to accept the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the additional protocols of 1977 (1977 and 1984), sending the Bellerive Declaration in favour of a public dialogue on energy to other Friends in Europe (1979), support for an individual concern for resisting payment of defense taxes (1979), a letter to Presidents Reagan and Brezhnev on disarmament (1980), a letter to the US government on ceasing military aid for the civil war in El Salvador (1982).

Nor have Friends neglected cooperation with other organisations such as the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Conference of Peace Churches, the Christian Peace Conference, the Swiss Council of Peace Associations, the Federation of Non-Violent Movements in French-speaking Switzerland, the

Geneva Committee against the Atom Bomb, the Committee for a Peace Week in Geneva, the International Peace Camp, and Women for Peace.

The Geneva Meeting has also had a strong sense of service to those in need. While visits to prisons, reading to old people, visits to hospitals, and work camps have been organised in the course of the years, more financial contributions than gifts of time can be listed. Among the causes and concerns favoured have been famine relief in the USSR, the work of Abbé Pierre, aid for Rudolph Olgiati and the Save the Children Fund, parcels for post-war Germany, food for delinquents in France, medical aid for the Gaza strip, and funds for a work camp of the Service Civil International in a cyclone-struck area of India. Since 1980, regular monthly collections have been sent to projects throughout the world.

Refugees have been a consistent concern, and usually help has been given for concrete projects carried out by someone known to Friends. Examples of aid were: help for Armenians (1927), the adoption of a German refugee child (1933), a concert for funds for the Entraide Européenne (1934), a study group on anti-semitism (1937), running an open foyer for refugees (1944), funds for Pierre Oppiger's camp for Spanish refugees (1947), operating a clothing center for refugees (1948), toys for refugees in a village aided by SCI (1950), funds for refugee projects in Austria (1955), aid to Hungarian refugees (1956), help with SCI work with refugees from Algeria in a home in Tunisia, scholarships for Greek refugees (1969), and for a Chilean refugee (1976), concern for Vietnam boat people (1977), aid for Quaker work with refugees in Botswana (1979), assistance for Quaker action among Salvadorean refugees in Mexico (1981), in Costa Rica (1983) and Guatemala (1984).

With the coming of the United Nations Development Decades, emphasis has shifted somewhat from service to development. Funds have gone to Danilo Doici in Sicily, to a Quaker Farm School in Greece, to community projects funded by Quaker Peace and Service in Algeria, Bangladesh and Kenya, to schemes of the American Friends Service Committee for education in Kampuchea, for agriculture in Laos, for rural development in Zimbabwe, for women's cooperatives in Mali, and for village development in Somalia. Money has been sent through the Right Sharing Fund of the Friends World Committee for consultation for development schemes in Bolivia, Brazil, Egypt and Haiti. An agricultural school in Cameroon was helped in connection with the Jeûne fédéral. From the Fédération genevoise de coopération, development aid has been transmitted to projects of Quaker Peace and Service in Botswana, and a booklet on How to Run A Small Development Project has been prepared by Nicholas Gillet and Edward Dommen for distribution in French and English.

Financial service has been accompanied by a programme of development education and a few well-documented conferences. The queries on sharing resources from the Friends World Committee for Consultation deepened understanding of development problems as well as commitment to solve difficulties of International action for development.

In view of the needs and troubles of the world, these concerns and acts of Friends in Geneva remain little more than symbolic, yet they show the possibility for socially-conscious members to find an outlet for their concerns and to share in corporate caring. They illustrate faithfulness to some guiding ideals and compassion with the world's suffering.

One might outline similarly the cooperation of Geneva Friends in the ecumenical quest. However, before World War II, hardly any records were kept on this aspect of Quaker life, and only after the war have persons been regularly appointed to cooperate with the English-speaking churches and with the Rassemblement oecuménique des églises et communautés

chrétiennes de Genève. Cooperation in the week of prayer for Christian unity each January and the day of prayer in March have been regular features of religious life. Retreats on the Voirons or at Talloires, meditations on peace with the Inter-religious Fellowship, joint meetings on the social gospel with the Christian socialists, participation in an inter-faith group, and cooperation with the World Council of Churches have been irregular features.

Within the Society, Friends have examined such questions as serving God and serving society, the kingdom of God and standards of value. A Quaker Book Club had a session with Willem Vissert'hoof on the works of Karl Barth; study groups have discussed the thought of Teilhard de Chardin; and speakers at quarterly meetings have examined the life of mystics and theologians such as Saint John of the Cross and Robert Barclay and have probed the meaning of prayer and fear. Geneva Friends formed a study circle on the challenge of the secular society to religion and joined other Friends in analyzing problems arising from the decline of interest in religion (1950) and the need for a restatement of belief to attract youth. Lectures on Isaac Pennington, John Woolman, John Greenleaf Whittier, Rufus Jones, Henry Cadbury and Clarence Pickett have revitalised the Quaker heritage and respect for personality. In the seventies a series of meetings with believers of other faiths gave Friends an opportunity to hear about other faiths and at times to join in strange patterns of worship. In the Eighties meetings have been held to explore the inwardness of some Asian religions and to discover points in common with other religions as regards such questions as fasting or ways to peace.

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