

Two Quaker groups coexisted in Geneva in 1926-1927

A radical change in the life of the Geneva Quaker Group occurred in 1926 when non-members of the Religious Society of Friends were excluded from the decision-making process. The history of Swiss quakerism almost completely ignores these events.

Chronology

A group was founded in Geneva by Madeleine Savary, a Vaudoise who became a member in England around 1910. Quaker meetings were held in her home "at least from 1918".

With the arrival of the League of Nations in 1920, British and American Quakers sent a dozen Friends to Geneva (all but one women), where they took turns from 1920 to 1926 to lay the foundations of an International Quaker Centre¹. The group held monthly business meetings from October 1920².

In 1925, the group was said in London to be "inexperienced in Quaker methods", and Carl Heath went to Geneva where he noted the confusion between the Group's activities and those of the Centre, as well as the risk of too much Anglo-Saxon influence, and advised the use of French within the Group.

The Council for International Service (CIS) decided in March 1926 to hire Bertram Pickard, accompanied by his wife Irene and a secretary. The Geneva Group minutes of 6 June announced the creation of a 'provisional committee' for international service, to be known as the "Center Committee."

Pickard expressed his concern to the Centre Committee on 4 September: "Given the circumstances, the Centre needs an Assembly of members of the Society of Friends, which will take care of the administration of the Group, fulfil the functions of the Elders and Overseers, and develop and direct in a proper Quaker spirit the new forces resulting from the coming together of Friends of different nationalities. In September, a report from the CIS mentions the creation of the Centre Committee and the transformation of the existing Group into a gathering and exchange group³.

On **12 October 1926** the "First Meeting of Members of the Society of Friends worshipping at Geneva" (the "Members' Meeting") took place. The minutes are in English (previously in French). Bertram Pickard acted as clerk and reiterated the concern he had already expressed to the Center Committee. It is a question of making maximum use of the service opportunity offered by the Geneva Meeting. With regard to the future of the "Group Meetings", they should not change, they can continue to provide opportunities for meetings, readings and discussions, which should not take place on Sundays.

At the **November 1926** meeting it was agreed to continue to give responsibility for worship to those in charge of the Centre, the Members' Meeting, and the Group⁴. In **March 1927** another minute states that Saturday afternoons meetings ("Saturday Socials") provide ample opportunity for discussion of Quaker and other matters for those connected with the Group.

¹ In 1927, Carl Heath had a vision of quaker « embassies » in the capitals of Europe.

² Madeleine Savary is clerk in 1920-22, Adèle Jaquerod (Genevese, then not a member) in 1922-27.

³ "The present Monthly Meeting of the Group is being converted into a more general congregational meeting, where there will be opportunity for hearing reports and entering into fellowship".

⁴ "to be responsible for facing the Meeting for Worship, and dealing with any special problems of eldership that may arise". Center's secretaries and treasurer, and Members Meeting's clerks.

On **19 October 1927**, the Nominations Committee noted that “since the formation of Members' Meeting, the old 'Group' is no longer functional, and consequently its clerk and assistant clerk are functional in name only, although they render invaluable service to the Meeting and to the work of the Centre in general”. It suggested to the Meeting that the Group as such should cease its activities permanently⁵. It was so decided.

In summary, the Group appointed a provisional committee for the Centre in June 1926. This committee hears the concern expressed by B. Pickard to create a new structure to serve the Centre and reach decisions instead of the existing Group. London approved it. In October the new “Members' Meeting” reduced the old Group to an informal network devoted to the study of Quakerism.

For one year, from October 1926 to October 1927, there were two Quaker groups and two clerks in Geneva: the pre-1920 Group and the Members' Meeting. The former was rather French-speaking and local, the latter mainly English-speaking and composed of internationals.

Analysis of the 13 business meetings from October 1926 to October 1927

A list of members and supporters was attached to the minutes of the first meeting.

Of the 16 members, four left Geneva during the year, balanced by new arrivals. Members are very active, attending most business meetings or sending apologies. Almost all of them accept functions (clerk, treasurer, librarian, delegate, speaker, musician, etc.) and participate in several ad hoc committees. Business meetings were attended by 6 to 18 members and up to a dozen visitors in the summer of 1927.

The list includes 23 attenders, one of whom is actually a Quaker. Four names were quickly withdrawn. Of the remaining 18, one third were Swiss women (several related by family ties), two were men, and five became members: three in 1928 (including a Japanese couple), in 1932 Blanche Shaffer-Weber (future general secretary of FWCC), and in 1942 the mother of Blanche. In 1952, Adèle Jaquerod mentions six sympathisers from that time, including three Swiss women and two Russians, who leave little or no trace in the archives.

Feelings

The decisions of 12 October 1926 may have been felt by the locals as a takeover by the Anglo-Saxons and they questioned the meaning of the “Quaker spirit”.

In a pamphlet published in Philadelphia in **1943** (*Quakerism in Switzerland*), reference is made to “a somewhat imperialist way” of using the English language and to the conditions which made its domination inevitable in Geneva. Perhaps it was a majority of the Group's local members who were “if not repelled, at least inhibited.” The text is signed by the Pickards and Blanche Shaffer-Weber, who all lived in Geneva between 1926 and 1940 and represent both English and Swiss cultures.

The group's historian wrote in **1963**⁶ that it was a “radical if undemocratic reform.” In his opinion, it was a wise decision, which made possible something “not only very different in quantity but also in quality”. His text ironises on the pre-1926 activities: “a coterie of elderly Russian exile women frequented the Center;” Jaquerod's translation of the minutes was “a labor of love verging on the ridiculous;” financial aid to a village in Haute-Savoie ravaged by fire was a thing of the past, “no longer did the meeting centre attention about such local catastrophes”. The author, Robert J. Leach, is an

⁵ It is also decided that Adèle Jaquerod (old Group's clerk) becomes Members Meeting's treasurer, and Irma Tischer (old Group's assistant clerk) becomes Members Meeting's assistant clerk.

⁶ Robert J. Leach, *A Short History of the Friends Meeting in Geneva*, 1963 (not published).

American who came to Geneva in 1950. While he knew or met some of the protagonists of 1926 (Jaquerod, Tischer, the Pickards), many others had already left Geneva. Of all the 1926 sympathisers, he probably only met Blanche Shaffer. Leach's story was not published, but copies were made for some members of the group.

In 1970⁷, Irene Pickard reported that “Bertram's first task was to introduce some order into the procedures.” She notes laconically that “language was a problem always”. She is now 80 years old and looks back on the priorities that people have given to their commitments. The “new forces” that arrived in Geneva with the League of Nations were immersed in international work, far from the interests of the locals who were attracted by worship, welfare and pacifism. Beyond language issues, Pickard notes that it was disappointing and difficult for Swiss pacifists to see that Friends were not engaged in the anti-war movement in Switzerland. Conversely, internationals were gradually brought to understand the importance of Pierre Ceresole's *Service Civil International* (SCI) in a country where conscription prevailed. (Significantly, Nitobe had warned Bertram Pickard not to get involved with Ceresole and SCI.)

Friends Meeting in Geneva - History, Insights, Practice is a booklet published in 1982⁸. Bertram Pickard's 1926 concern is reproduced in part, including the essential words: *peculiar circumstances ... our Center required a Meeting of actual members ... in the distinctly Quaker spirit*. It was probably Dorothea Woods who wrote the brief historical section, with the comment: “It is not likely that a long-lasting group could have been built up by foreigners without a strong indigenous membership.” It may refer to the war years, when a few locals replaced the Anglo-Saxons who left in the spring of 1940. Woods was an American involved in Quaker service in Europe after the war. She became a member in Geneva in 1958. She is the only person who values the local members so much that she says that without them the Geneva Quaker Group would not have lasted.

Woods wrote the report of a meeting on the spread of Quakerism in Switzerland in 1999⁹. She refers to Leach's view in his historical introduction that most Swiss Quakers were, until the 1970s, “refugees” from the Protestant churches who would not have “swallowed” the discipline of the London Yearly Meeting (except perhaps in relation to worship). The report also states that “Swiss Friends often regarded the Geneva Group as a bastion of Anglo-Saxon Quaker procedures and that Robert Leach was formalistic in his attempts to gain acceptance of ordinary procedures for Swiss Yearly Meetings.”

A current look at these events

Projects, languages, cultures, personal itineraries... are all aspects that contributed to difficult relations within the Geneva group. The slow work of appropriating Quakerism in Switzerland was confronted with the arrival, from the 1920s onwards, of a large number of foreigners, often Anglo-Saxon Quakers mainly motivated by international work.

Michel Mégard, 11 May 2023 (original text in French)

⁷ *Anniversary session of Lac Léman Quarterly Meeting*, Geneva, 1970.

⁸ *Friends Meeting in Geneva : History, Insights, Practice*, [ed. Dorothea Woods], [1985, 1re éd. 1982] – the “Blue Book”, based on a project written in French 1979-1980.

⁹ *The Spread of Quakerism in Multi-Cultural Switzerland*, Dorothea Woods, 1999, 3 pages – report of a meeting with the Group's Elders (archives ASYM/G/A.3-F).