

Geneva Quaker Group: institutional history

A Quaker Group has been holding Meetings in Geneva at least since 1920. This group, consists of members and sympathisers of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

The Group evolved in parallel with “The International Quaker Centre in Geneva”. The Centre is a project closely linked with the creation of the League of Nations, and supported by Quakers in Great Britain and the United States. The Centre became the Quaker United Nations Office in 1977.

This article describes the evolution of the Geneva Quaker Group in relation to Quaker structures, based on historical circumstances and the evolution of relations with other Quaker organisations.

From 1918 – Informal and independent Worship Group

Madeleine Savary launched weekly Quaker worship in her home on the outskirts of Geneva’s Old Town, with half a dozen participants. According to Adèle Jaquerod’s testimony, as relayed by Irene Pickard, it began in 1918 (Irene knew Adèle from 1926 onwards); according to others, they did not begin until shortly before June 1920. This group is independent of any Quaker institution.

Madeleine Savary was born in 1879 in canton Vaud; she was described as calm, generous and intelligent. She lived in England between 1908 and 1912 among Quakers and artists and became a member of the Society of Friends around 1910. Living in Geneva from 1916 on, she became a teacher and then worked at the International Labour Office until her untimely death in 1925.

June 1920 – Formal Worship Group under the care of London Quakers

The Friends Council for International Service (FCIS), a Committee of London Yearly Meeting responsible for missions abroad, decided to send Ethel and Herbert Jones to Geneva to create a “Quaker Embassy” in connection with the creation of the League of Nations. In a report, Ethel Jones mentioned the first Quaker Meeting for Worship as having been held on June 6, 1920. She did not mention the existence of a group before that date.

The FCIS paid not only the salaries of its delegates, but also the rent of a room for the Sunday Meetings for Worship in the Place de la Taconnerie in Geneva’s Old Town. The Group received later books from the FCIS. The Geneva Group is described as being “under the care of” the FCIS, which remained the case until 1939.

Until 1926, many volunteers from Britain and the United States are sent to Geneva, for only some weeks or some months, mainly women.

October 1920 – Group holding Meetings for Business

The first Meeting for Business was held on October 3, 1920. Such Meetings took place monthly with occasional interruptions (in particular between April and November 1922). Madeleine Savary was the first clerk, succeeded by Adèle Jaquerod at the end of 1922.

This step made it possible for the Group to take decisions and organise its activities in a manner similar to that of a regular Monthly Meeting in Britain. Items on the agendas of these meetings were typical of such a group (library, themed discussions, talks, nominations of a clerk and treasurer, admissions to membership), and sometimes those of a Centre (relationship with other European Centres).

Geneva Quaker Group: institutional history

Determined to retain its independence, the Group reimbursed in Jan-April 1921 the rent previously paid by FCIS.

The first memberships through the Geneva Quaker Group took place in 1921 and 1923. At that time, the Group did not have the authority to grant membership in the Religious Society of Friends, so it had to forward the applications of Emily Greene Balch and Anna Kaznatcheff to the FCIS in London.

1923 – Group holding Meetings for Business, indistinct from the Quaker Centre

To enable the Centre to function, it needed to rent premises and engage more staff. The FCIS in London and the AFSC in Philadelphia decided in May/June 1923 to rent three rooms in order to house both the Group and the Centre. It was noted that the Group had existed since 1920, becoming more and more active over the years.

An English employee of the AFSC (Ethel Mather, warden of the Quaker Centre) introduced readings from *Advices and Queries* in 1924, together with a mid-week Meeting for Worship.

In 1921 a collection was taken for victims of famine in Russia. Other collections went to the Centres in Berlin (1924) and Warsaw (1925). The Group's first archivist (Robert J. Leach, in his historical account from 1963) saw these as activities which should have been undertaken by the Centre but were in fact undertaken by the Group, which took on the role of Committee of the Centre from 1923-26.

In 1925, Madeleine Savary, founder of the Group, died prematurely. Carl Heath, initiator of the 'Quaker embassies', observed that it was necessary to differentiate between the functions and responsibilities of the Group and the Centre. For the first time, the Group was invited to send a delegate to the Annual Meeting in London.

1926 – Two groups, apart from the Quaker Centre

The Englishman Bertram Pickard (1892-1973) was appointed representative of the FCIS in Geneva, accompanied by his wife Irene (1891-1981). They played a central role from June 1926 to May 1940. There was talk of a "new start", and 1926 was noted as being the true beginning of the Centre's activities.

Bertram Pickard organized in October of that year a "First Meeting of members of the Society of Friends worshipping at Geneva". Meetings for Business became "Members Meetings", with the double objective of excluding non-members of the Society and clearly separating the activities of the Centre from those of the Group. A secretary has been hired for the Centre.

The former Group continues to exist alongside the Members' Meeting. It is permitted to hold meetings, readings, and discussions, but not on Sundays. It does not hold business meetings. This Group is dissolved after one year.

1927 – Members' Meeting, distinct from the Quaker Centre

The clerk, assistant clerk and treasurer of the Members' Meeting represent it on the Centre Committee. The Pickards remain very involved in the Members' Meeting. Irene is assistant clerk, then clerk in 1931, Bertram leads courses on Quakerism and brings topics to business meetings. In 1927-1928, with the support of the Meeting, he took a stand on behalf of a Swiss conscientious objector: the authorities threatened to revoke his residence permit if he continued to meddle in domestic politics. The terms "Members Meeting" and *Réunion des membres* were used formally until 1950, but in French, the term *Groupe* came back into common use. Around fifteen people attended the Group's meetings in the late 1920s, including three French speakers.

Geneva Quaker Group: institutional history

The “Quaker Student Hostel” was created in 1927, meant particularly for students of the International Graduate Institute of Geneva University.

Willis Hall, who stayed at the Foyer, wrote a thesis in 1938 on the international activities of the Quakers from 1914 onwards. He noted that the Group functioned on most levels as a Monthly Meeting of London Yearly Meeting, through the Friends Service Council (FSC, which replaced the FCIS from 1927 onwards).

According to Robert Leach, the Group was recognized in 1933 as a new and particular type of group, un-affiliated (comprising members of several different Annual Meetings and international in its composition), which had the same right to send representatives as did a Yearly Meeting to Quaker European Conferences and the World Friends’ Conference in 1937. The situation of the Geneva Group became more complicated in 1939 and even more so in 1940, when most foreigners left Switzerland and the group lost its original particular status.

1939 – Preparative Meeting under the care of Swiss General Meeting

In 1939, the status of the Quaker Geneva Group changed radically. It had been under the auspices of London Yearly Meeting; it was now attached to the “Swiss General Meeting” (SGM), recently recognised by London Yearly Meeting with the authority of a Quarterly and Monthly Meeting.

The Geneva Group then became a Preparative Meeting of SGM. Swiss members of the Society of Friends in London, France and Germany had their membership transferred to the SGM, which was not the case for those non-Swiss who had become members through Geneva.

1940 – “Custodial Discussion Committee”

With the “evaporation” (Robert Leach’s word) of Geneva’s international community a crisis structure was established: the “Geneva Custodial Discussion Committee”, with the aim of maintaining both the Group and the Centre in Geneva – the principal objective being to continue holding Meetings for Worship during the war.

In the summer of 1940, Frances Leckie (originally from the Netherlands) took over as clerk of the Group and President of the Custodial Committee. This committee of three met with the Centre Secretary once a week and with Gilbert McMaster once a month. The committee gradually expanded to include up to half a dozen members.

Gilbert MacMaster (1869-1967) was an American Quaker who had worked for a long time for the AFSC in Berlin. He retired to live in Basel and during the war became advisor to the Geneva Centre and Hostel.

Between 1937 and 1942, the Quaker Group, Centre and Hostel had their premises in Geneva’s Palais Wilson. But when the Hostel closed in 1942, Violette and Felix Ansermoz rented a villa which housed both the Group and the Centre. The Ansermoz, who had been working for the Hostel, were employed thereafter by AFSC.

The Group organised talks attended by up to 75 people. It led a study week at the Palais Wilson in July 1941, sent periodical circular to those in sympathy with its ideas, published a new translation of *Advices and Queries*, and corresponded with the FSC in London and other Quaker Centres in Europe. The Group gave its support to imprisoned soldiers from France, Belgium and Poland as well as German Jews interned in France and the family of a conscientious objector in Geneva.

1943 – Preparative Meeting

The Group resumed Business Meetings in 1943, with clerks appointed annually until 1950. It remained a Preparative Meeting under the care of Swiss General Meeting then of Switzerland Yearly Meeting (SYM), which in 1947 became independent of London.

The Group established a Committee of Elders in 1948, which in turn appointed Overseers. Overseers became a separate Committee in the 1950s. An archivist was appointed in 1960.

The minutes of the Members' Meeting (so named since 1926) adopted the new name of Monthly Meeting in 1950, because the Group saw itself as functioning as such, although the change in status formally took effect only in 1963.

In April 1954 the Group approved the edition of a guide to the processes involved in births, marriages and deaths, entitled "Guidance to Friends".

In 1963, Robert Leach produced a history of the Group, in manuscript form, covering the years 1920-1960.

1963 – Geneva Monthly Meeting

Switzerland Yearly Meeting approved new statutes in 1963. Geneva Group was then recognized as a Monthly Meeting. In the early 1960s, three representatives of the Group participated in the Centre Committee and a 'Joint Committee' (Group and Centre) set about finding new premises.

In 1971, the Meeting adopted a text describing the *Responsibilities of Elders and Overseers*.

Since 1965, thought had been given to a Geneva Quaker House Foundation (later Geneva Quaker Foundation – GQF); it was created in November 1973. This new organization made it possible for Friends to buy a house in avenue du Mervelet. The Geneva Centre became the "Quaker United Nations Office" (QUNO) in 1977.

A document describing the history and practices of the Group was prepared in 1979 in French, eventually appearing in English in 1982 as *Friends Meeting in Geneva: History, Insights, Practice*. This "Blue Book", so-called from the color of its cover, had about 50 pages, including the annex "Us et Coutumes" of SYM in French (with its translation in English: "Ways and Customs").

The first Statutes of Geneva Monthly Meeting were adopted in May 1986, in French. The official name became "Société religieuse des Amis (quakers) Groupe de Genève" (Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Geneva Group). These statutes made mention of "friends of Friends" (a term used in continental Europe to denote attenders at Meetings for Worship) who could participate in Meetings for Business but only "by invitation". Upon their parents' request, children were admitted provisionally until age 25; from age 16 they could ask to become members in their own right.

The Group shared Quaker House in Mervelet with QUNO, above all on Sundays and for the most part used just the Meeting room and the Children's room. The ownership and management of the house was the responsibility of the Foundation, whose Committee included members of the Group (other members in 2010 are representatives of FWCC, AFSC, QPSW, QUNA and SYM).

QUNO independence was achieved step by step: in 1999 the Quaker UN Committee (QUNC) and in 2004 the Quaker UN Association were created, the latter became in 2011 the Quaker United Nations Office Geneva Association (QUNOGA – a Swiss legal association). From this point on QUNO was fully independent from Britain Yearly Meeting. In 2013 the house was handed over to QUNOGA and the Foundation dissolved.

Geneva Quaker Group: institutional history

An agreement between the Group and QUNOGA concerning the use of the house was made in 2013 and revised in 2017.

Archives of the “Group” and the “Centre”

In the early 1980s, the archives of the Group and those of the Swiss Quakers, followed by those of the International Centre, were deposited at the United Nations Office Geneva Library. Ten years later, the Centre's archives were transferred to London.

The archives of the Group and SYM returned from UNOG to the Quaker House in March 2025. In the same year, the London Assembly agreed to transfer ownership of the International Centre's archives to QUNO. It was decided that these archives would be donated to the United Nations Library, which would catalogue and promote them. The QUNO archives still at the Quaker House would later be donated as additions.

The records reflect the distinction between the ‘Group’ and the ‘Centre’ since 1926. However, history shows that numerous links have brought them closer together beyond this formal separation.

Michel Mégard, August 9, 2025 (translated February 2026)

Notes on terminology

French terms are taken from several texts, chiefly the draft *Foi et pratique – La Voie Quaker* (1979), published in 1982 in English as “Friends Meeting in Geneva” (Archives SYM, G/B.4-A).

The official names of the group are in practice little used. The French « Groupe quaker de Genève » has gone through all eras.

The Religious Society of Friends is organized into Yearly Meetings, which bring together Meetings known as Monthly or Area Meetings. These may in turn group together several Preparative Meetings or Worship Groups in the same city or region.

FWCC: Friends World Committee for Consultation

QPSW: Quaker Peace & Social Witness

AFSC: American Friends Service Committee

Sources

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Archives

Archives from the Geneva Quaker Group and the Switzerland Yearly Meeting.

- GMM Minutes (G/A.1)
- Clerks annual reports (G/A.1c)
- SYM Minutes (S/A.1)
- Clerks annual reports (S/A.1c)

Archives from Britain Yearly Meeting

- Minutes from *Friends Council for International Service* (FCIS, 1919-1927)