Returning to Quaker Roots: A Visit with Conservative Friends

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Conservative Friends may be the purest surviving form of American Quakerism.

Outwardly, they continue many of the traditions and customs of Friends of earlier days in their use of "plain" language and the plain or near-plain dress of some older members. Inwardly, meeting for worship is held on the basis of silence, without music or hired ministers. And their peculiar combination of conservative values—refusal to participate in war, deep dependence on the sober leading of the inner Light, and the use of scriptural texts from memory when speaking—mark them as both Universalist and evangelical—and yet neither. They are not quite at home with any but their own.

As I attended unprogrammed Friends meetings over the past four years in Eugene, Oregon; Arcata, California; and Tulsa, Oklahoma, where I now live, my encounters with Friends deepened my interest both in Quakerism and in the Conservative Quaker origins of my father and the Doudnas before him. All of us trace our origins to Barnesville, Ohio, where Doudnas have been part of Ohio Yearly Meeting (conservative) since its beginnings in the early 1800s.

And so to widen my encounters with Friends and to learn more about my Doudna origins, I went to Barnesville this past August to attend Ohio Yearly Meeting.

It is one of only three conservative yearly meetings still in existence, and I am told that it is more "conservative" than either Iowa or North Carolina—that is, least adapted to the worldly ways of the larger body of Quakerism.

Yearly meeting members gather each year at the meetinghouse constructed for that purpose in 1878 on the campus of Olney Friends Boarding School in Barnesville. Because of the school's 108-year history, because it represents the greatest financial outlay of the Yearly Meeting, and because most of the yearly meeting's members were graduated from it, the boarding school occupies a very high place in the hearts and concerns of yearly meeting.

The campus has a special history for me. The graveyard immediately adjacent to the Barnesville meetinghouse contains the graves of "John Doudna—ancestor of all the Doudnas," and that of Sarah Doudna, his wife. It was at the boarding school that my grandfather, Willis Doudna, who was working on the school farm, met my grandmother, Hannah Hoyt, who was working in the school kitchen. The nearby Somerset (or "Ridge") Meetinghouse, where Doudnas (all old now) still predominate, is where my grandfather attended meeting in his childhood.

My visit introduced me to some of the lasting values of Ohio Yearly Meeting. Its predominant strength is in its elders, and the awareness of this brings real sadness to some of its older members.

They recognize that there are few young members to carry on the traditional ways which mark conservative Friends. It brings a sadness to me, too—given this recent return to my roots—to think of Ohio Yearly Meeting being absorbed into the larger body of Quakerism and the distinctive Wilburite ways lost.

During my visit, I learned that attendance at the meetings for business averaged between 60 and 100, with perhaps 150 on the final First-day meeting for worship. The decline in membership is clear when comparing these numbers with the following newspaper account in 1878, the first year of the meetinghouse.

> By careful estimate, it is believed the house will seat 1,200 people comfortably; but its crowded condition Sunday morning and afternoon, when public services were held, leaves no doubt that at least 1,500 were present, the afternoon meeting being rather the larger one. But through the kindness of the ushers, all—with a few exceptions—were provided with seats, every available space being occupied, even the steps leading to the galleries. The order and quiet were remarkable—not a single instance of disorder occurring.

Every Friends Meeting in the country would do well to observe Ohio Yearly Meeting business sessions. The ones I attended began with from 20 to 30 minutes of silent, unprogrammed worship; then, out of the silence, the clerk rose and introduced the first item for consideration.

In a slow, methodical way, items were raised and discussed, and a minute representing the sense of the meeting was composed by the clerk and approved. There was no rush, and much use was made of silence between speaking. Yet business was conducted more effectively than in many other Friends meetings in my experience. This was due in large part to the skilled clerking of William Cope and the decentralized participation of the meeting as a whole.

When a Friend rose to express a thought or an opinion that represented the minds of others present, I heard voices arising from different parts of the room simultaneously: “I approve.” “So do I.” “I approve, too.” A similar response of perhaps a dozen or more voices scattered through the meeting, verbally affirming approval, would follow the clerk’s reading of the minute he was composing as the group dealt with a matter. Other times, Friends would suggest corrections of the clerk’s minute, or there would be further speaking to the matter until it expressed the true sense of the meeting. Often interspersed with the affairs of business at hand would be simple silence and sometimes a spoken message on a spiritual matter. This is a reflection of all Friends’ regard for business meetings as, in fact, “meetings for worship in which business is conducted,” and not as if worship and business, with its concern over money and material affairs, are in separate spheres.

I have often thought that for Friends to do business and actually function for 300 years without authority of office or voting to make decisions for the group would be unthinkable for most of society. Yet, Friends have done so. Not without problems, certainly; but it stands as a marked example through the test of time that the seemingly impossible can be made possible and real.

Such a method of corporate decision making—by listening to the voice and leadings of every person who feels called to speak, and letting a gathered sense of the meeting form in its own unpredictable and timely way—must be developed over time with experience. Ohio Year Meeting’s conservative Friends have had 171 years of experience. This is a resource which newer Friends everywhere would do well to observe and learn from. Even the world at large might do well to consider experientially applying, perhaps in small ways at first, the ways of conservative Friends in business affairs, and perhaps ultimately, in the affairs of government. [End]