

A HISTORY OF 57TH STREET MEETING

1955 - 1980

Presented on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary Celebration
by Michael Seadle

In the past 25 years members of 57th Street Meeting have sought to live out their Quaker faith on a daily basis. They were ambitious people who believed in social change. They worked hard for the causes of peace, economic justice, and racial equality. They thought they could remake the world, but both demography and society turned against them.

The history of 57th Street Meeting is a tale of disappointed hopes. Some have expressed their concern that such an account is not appropriate to this festive occasion. Yet Friends believe in speaking the truth at all times. No saccharine claims can help to celebrate either the Meeting or those goals its members worked for.

This history breaks naturally into three periods. The first is one of balance between internal religious concerns and social action (roughly 1955-1967). The second is one in which the major focus is social action (1968-1970). And the third is one in which the energy and passion to carry forth social change fades, internal problems dominate, and the Meeting looks back with envy to its past.

All quotations come from Meeting reports, and may be found in the archives of Quaker House. Authors are cited where known.

The first period properly begins with gala celebration of the Meeting's first quarter century:

The 25th anniversary observance of the founding of 57th Street Meeting was held at John Woolman Hall on January 8, 1956. ...Upwards of 150 people found it possible to attend this well-planned program, while many others sent greetings. It was a gratifying occasion, particularly for those who had laid the symbolic cornerstones in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

--Alice Flitcraft, March 1956

57th Street had had much to celebrate: the union of two meetings, the acquisition of Quaker House, the work with refugees and conscientious objectors, and the long concern for civil rights. Members had worked hard during the past quarter century, and had every reason to expect their record of success to continue.

Continue it did. "The most active committee," wrote Mary Cadbury in December, 1957, "has been peace and social concerns." Part of its work was to sponsor forums by socially active friends:

In a forum, Bradford Lyttle gave an interesting discussion of life and activities in India, as seen by him during the

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four months he spent in that country. He told about how some things are being done to improve the lot of those in extreme poverty. To show how some activities area carried on, he had with him some Indian articles, including woven pieces from the AFSC project in Barpali.

--Robinda Bland, September, 1957

Some forums were not presentations, but discussions, such as this one about the Hyde Park urban renewal plan in 1958:

Members seem concerned over the fate of people who live in crowded quarters, and those whose lives are warped by squalor and racial tension. They question the distrust of mankind that arises when children have to be taught to distrust a stranger, or the feelings of anger that arise when one's property is stolen.

--Ann White, March, 1958

Such community issues were very much a Meeting concern:

One obvious characteristic of the Meeting during the past quarter had been its continuing involvement in the life of the local community. Active members and attenders, indeed, live in various parts of Chicago and its suburbs. Members have been stirred up by and active in such issues as the reorganization of a Chicago Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy and the choice and direction of leadership in the city's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Yet the bulk of our membership and the heart of the Meeting's life is in the Hyde Park community. This community has faced the opening of a missile base nearby, the final stages of controversy over whether there should be a Hyde-Park-Kenwood urban renewal program, and the continuing question of what shall be the nature of this program in its details.

--Vail Palmer, December, 1958

Friends did not pursue local issues to the exclusion of national ones:

The participants of Omaha Action have been much on our hearts this summer. Several of them are known personally to us at Quaker House, and having the parents of Bradford Lyttle worshipping with us has brought us closer to the spirit of the group. At the Meeting's request, Charles Lyttle explained informally the motivation of the group primarily for the benefit of new attenders and visitors. Our Peace and Social Concerns committee encouraged participation in the Hiroshima Day remembrance activities in this area.

--Bob and Charlotte Beshears, Summer, 1959

The Meeting continued its tradition of caring for refugee families. In the fall of 1961, members took in two couples, twin

sisters from the Netherlands who had married men from the West Indies. By the winter of 1962, these people had jobs and seemed well enough settled that the Meeting decided to sponsor another refugee couple in the spring.

An apparent falling off of social involvement did not last long:

There has been renewed activity in the area of peace action. The Peace committee collected voluntary taxes for the United Nations from 57th Street Meeting. The committee initiated a project of Toys for Peace at the time when many people were buying toys for Christmas presents. Several among us wrote letters to the newspapers telling of the fine non-war toys available and the need to emphasize them. Letters went to other local churches and synagogues. At least one department store manager was interviewed by members of the Peace committee, and other interviews were planned. In December the committee was asked to take responsibility for selecting and guiding a peace intern who will be doing his day-to-day field work at the Hyde Park Peace Center; Turn Toward Peace made the grant for the interns as part of their program of community peace effort.

--Elizabeth Mertic, Fall, 1962

The fall, 1962 presidential election excited still more activity:

We responded in quite diverse ways to the challenge of better ordering our society. Many Friends were very busy with the local and national elections in November. On the Sunday preceding the elections, a most lively and enthusiastic forum discussion took place. Some 57th Streeters had been actively campaigning to re-seat the local incumbent in Congress, while others vigorously campaigned for a candidate sponsored by Voters for Peace.

--Elizabeth Mertic, fall, 1962

As with all meetings, 57th Street had peaks and troughs of social action, but the troughs were shallow and the peaks high. Early in 1966 George Watson, his daughter Jean, and his son John stood in front of the White House for two hours in the pouring rain as part of the Vigil for Peace in Vietnam. This was typical of members' commitment:

Some marched in the civil rights marches, even to the extent of being hit by bricks and feeling the impact of hostility and prejudice. Some attempted to be a force for the good in the west side riots. Some have witnessed against the Vietnam war in distributing pamphlets at the Armed Forces Induction Center, and elsewhere protesting the telephone tax that is largely for the Vietnam War. ...Even in our Meetings for Worship we feel the striving to bring a spiritual concern into these injustices and many felt enriched and challenged

by those who have been participating and searching in these endeavors.

--Sylvia Way, September, 1966

As a climax to these many years of activity, 57th Street Meeting received an endowment from a man little known to members, but who valued the work the Meeting undertook. The Meeting called the endowment the Dickenson Fund, and dedicated it to help achieve ongoing concerns.

Some internal problems and religious questions surfaced during this period. Modest retrenchments in committee structure became necessary, but even these seemed merely to open the way to new social concerns:

To simplify the Meeting structure, an assembly of committee chairmen has suggested the uniting of Visiting-Correspondence and Welcomers with Outreach and Advancement. The latter committee has expressed a concern to visit jails and prisons, as did the Quakers of yore.

--Alice Flitcraft, March, 1956

The Meeting also had worries about membership, but viewed the changes that were taking place as part of a natural cycle:

Our Meeting is now feeling concern at the loss from resident membership within only a few months of several young families who have in recent years carried with devotion and high competence increasing responsibilities in the life of the group. But this has always been the nature of our local Meeting with its fluid membership. People come and seek and grow for a time with us, then leave to witness and serve elsewhere. And as we sustain these losses other persons are raised up or awoken to accept the mantle of responsibility from those who depart. We have suffered heavy losses before and shall almost certainly do so again. This is the glory of our Meeting.

--Bob and Charlotte Beshears, March, 1959

The problem was natural for a university community. Erna Lowenberg repeated the lament in 1961:

Among the difficulties our Meeting especially encounters throughout the years is the frequent departure of seasoned families, and, at the same time, the attendance of individuals, welcomed in our midst, whom we do not seem to help adequately in becoming part of our Meeting.

--Erna Lowenberg, ?, 1961

Problems with the spoken ministry existed during this period, but reflected personal needs, not Meeting splits:

Some of our vocal ministry grows out of personal crises in the lives of those who have spoken. ...In moderation, this

therapeutic expression of spiritual seeking may be an important function which the Meeting can supply. But what are we prepared to offer the member, or the seeker, whose needs go far beyond this?

--Kenneth Ives, Winter, 1962

The Meeting's success in its public affairs contrasted with unmet internal needs:

We have created organizations with sizable staffs to help us express our concerns about peace and social justice. But we have not as yet created equally sizable, inspired, and effective organization and staff to help us with our religious concerns and personal spiritual development.

--Kenneth Ives, Winter, 1962

Similar complaints appeared later, but during these early years the internal needs were modest. The balance between faith and action survived until the social and political turbulence of the late 1960s.

The next period, 1968-70, was one of frenzied activity. The Martin Luther King riots, the Vietnam war, the Chicago Democratic Convention, and the election of Richard Nixon -- all contributed to the Meeting's sense of a world in revolution. It seemed as if an opportunity had come in which dedicated individuals could affect the future of their society.

In 1967-68 the Meeting raised money for Robert van Rotz to work full time with the Chicago Area Draft Resisters, and approved sending money to relieve suffering in both North and South Vietnam. During the King riots in May, 1968, "Quaker House became a collecting center for relief in the westside riot area." (Pieter Byhouwer, State of Society Report, 1967-68). These were major actions, but they seemed less immediate than what happened in August:

During the last week of August, when the Democratic National Convention was meeting in Chicago, Quaker House was used by out of town Resistance groups in cooperation with the Chicago Area Draft Resisters (many of whom attended our Meeting). Victor Bell, a young man who had left the army because he could not be a soldier any more, joined the Resistance people at Quaker House, and, at a special meeting for business, a decision was minuted "to join with members of the Resistance in extending to Victor the fellowship of a community of sanctuary and support." On Sunday, September 1st, just before worship ended, Victor was arrested on the front steps of Quaker House. The Meeting for worship moved outside, where nine people stayed in front of the car where Victor was being held, showing their support for his conscientious decision against the war, and trying to help him maintain that decision. The nine were arrested, and the

Meeting subsequently offered to pay the fines that would be imposed. From the Fort Riley, Kansas, stockade, Victor Bell requested membership in 57th Street Meeting. Through correspondence and visitation with him, both by members of this Meeting and of the Manhattan Kansas Meeting, he was accepted into membership at 57th Street. He is now serving a term at Fort Leavenworth, where Friends wrote letters of welcome to him. Other Chicago area Friends have found Victor a job and a place to live so that when he is paroled he will be with us again.

--Nancy Finke, June, 1969

This was not the only incident involving draft resistance:

The monthly Meeting called a special meeting for worship at which David Finke read a letter to his draft board telling of his inability to cooperate with the Selective Service any longer. He gave this letter and his draft cards to friends at the meeting who also signed a letter of support for him. Some will accompany him to a personal appearance with his draft board, where they plan to return the cards and talk with the board about this decision.

--Nancy Finke, June, 1969

This enormous involvement with peace and social concerns had consequences for the meeting for worship:

Seldom have we experienced a meeting that was truly gathered and unified. Often vocal ministry has begun before we were really together in the silence, one message following another swiftly and bearing little relationship to it. Many of our messages have had a strongly negative tone, arising as they have out of our feelings of frustration and powerlessness to affect seriously the evils of our time.

--Barbara and Roger Conant, December, 1969

Nonetheless the feeling remained positive:

This great freedom, diversity, and ever-changing nature of our Quaker community -- perhaps the cause of many of our concerns -- is widely recognized as one of our greatest assets.

--Barbara and Roger Conant, December, 1969

In 1970 the Meeting broke off its intense involvement with social concerns:

The community life at 57th Street Meeting has undergone a distinctive change in emphasis during the year 1970. When the year began the Meeting was extremely active in the areas of peace and social concerns. ...As the year wore on,

attention seemed to be diverted somewhat from external affairs as Friends began to be more and more concerned about the quality of life in the Meeting.

—Sandra Cronk & Pieter Byhouwer, December, 1970

One of the changes was the organization of a commune in Quaker House. The idea arose among some younger members who had had contact with New Swarthmore. They hoped to create a "close-knit community which would also maintain strong ties with 57th Street Meeting." (Sandra Cronk & Pieter Byhouwer, December, 1970). Worship sharing groups began, as well as an informal group which arranged post-Meeting discussions on the principles of Quakerism. In following year, 1971, people gathered to sing before meeting for worship.

Despite these efforts at building a renewed sense of community, the Meeting felt dissatisfied:

The uneven and experimental character of the Meeting's activities in general was perhaps exemplified most visibly in Meeting for Worship. Previous efforts to encourage more intimate gathered worship had led to the the meeting every other Sunday of three small parallel groups, while the single large group continued to meet on alternate Sundays. This did not result in the desired closeness and was laid down in favor of a large meeting with a simultaneous worship group for those to whom worship is more meaningful in this way. The smaller session was discontinued for lack of attendance.

—State of the Meeting Report, 1971

The focus of the Meeting's activity changed. Forums on social concerns had sparse attendance, but a new type of discussion group sprang forth to replace them:

The adult study group which meets in Quaker House for an hour before Meeting for Worship has been active and well attended. The group is currently studying George Fox's Journal. Members have reported that the pre-meeting study not only helps prepare them for worship, but has been singularly effective in getting them to Meeting on time.

—State of the Meeting Report, 1971

Discontent sounded through even the most hopeful accounts:

The retreat spurred the setting up of several search groups: one open to couples, one open to men, and one open to all. The search groups developed a less formalized format than worship-sharing groups. Interpersonal stress threatened even the setting up of such search groups; exclusion was felt by a few. Clashes between individuals have occurred often enough to cause concern among us. Several have expressed the

view that more intimate contacts with each other will lead us to express feelings long held repressed.

--State of the Meeting Report, 1972

Membership on both the Peace and the Social Concerns committees declined so much that the two began holding joint sessions:

It is as if the Meeting does not have the time and/or inclination to develop effective social action and effective interpersonal relations simultaneously.

--State of the Meeting Report, 1972

Despite these reflections, social action had not ceased. Palmer Singleton "witnessed to the Friends' peace testimony in Federal prison as a draft refuser" and Don Mertic became the Executive Secretary of the Midwest Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee. These were, however, individual commitments. The Meeting itself began to feel it had lost the ability to act:

For some of us, a sense of diminished attendance and activity is an ongoing concern. The willingness and skill of present attenders to work on tasks in the Meeting appears disappointing to many of us. While training of new leadership goes on, recruitment for existing offices continues to be difficult. ...Another major concern is with the functioning of committees. Late in the year, because of both new and old problems with unresolved differences among attenders most interested and active in the Peace and Social Concerns committee, consideration was given in a meeting for business to the possibility of laying down this committee while a new beginning was created.

--Carol Zimmerman, December, 1973

The Meeting decided to keep the committee, and some activity continued:

In the area of peace and non-violence, war tax resistance came to our attention through an IRS communication about the non-payment of taxes on the commune's telephone bills. The bills come to Bill Sanderson as house manager, and the Meeting was in full support of his resistance.

--State of the Meeting Report, 1974

The Meeting heard other social concerns as well: appeals for the Vietnam War Orphans fund, support for the Alliance to End Repression, and a letter to Jewel Food Stores on behalf of the United Farm Workers. Also more than twenty members and attenders served as staff, committee members, or volunteers at AFSC. Individuals remained active, and often sought to involve the Meeting in their projects, but their attempts failed. The Meeting had little clarity on priorities. In 1975 it finally decided to lay down the Peace and Social Concerns committee.

The Meeting felt a sense of loss and a need to rebuild:

Several changes in the Meeting community have occurred in recent times. Attendance at worship has declined. Seekers from the immediate community do not as often find our door. Active participants have left us for business reasons, to pursue different leadings, to reassess priorities. The realignment of key families has affected all dimensions of our life together. Increased operating expenses and the sheer pace of life at present in our world are burdens on our material and spiritual resources. Such changes are not unique to 57th Street Meeting, but we feel them keenly, find them exasperating as we look to a distinguished, revered past in attempting to construct a worthy future. We sense we must streamline and coordinate the practical functioning of the Meeting to reflect the conditions and resources of our present moment. We seek to be sensitive to one another, to reaffirm ourselves, to walk cheerfully in the light together.

--Edward Buckbee, State of the Society Report, 1976

The situation had not improved in 1977. Sylvia Way expressed a hope many others felt:

Perhaps when we have fewer problems, we can again become more socially active.

--Sylvia Way, State of Society Report, 1977

Did the Meeting solve those problems in the final three years of this history? It made some advances. The Meeting took up sponsorship once again of refugee families, and brought the Peace and Social Concerns committee back to life. A history which showed 57th Street about to return to its days of splendor would please everyone.

But histories are not fairy tales. Fundamental changes have taken place since the early 1960s. 57th Street is no longer the main unprogrammed meeting of metropolitan Chicago. Other meetings, many originally preparatory meetings under 57th Street's care, have grown larger and richer. They drew off active members who might otherwise have driven to Hyde Park.

Hyde Park has also changed. It has grown richer, less bohemian, and more isolated. Demographic change contributed substantially to the Meeting's decline.

Equally important has been the change in American society. The 1960s were revolutionary times. The civil rights and anti-war movements touched the lives of enormous numbers of people, and the Society of Friends played a leading role in both. The 1970s offered only retrenchment and consolidation. The decade was a slow time nationally for social concerns.

One meeting cannot not remake the world now any more than it could in the 1960s. 57th Street may have failed, but it never lost its vision of a better world or its commitment to trying to achieve it.

57th Street will never again be as rich and influential as it once was. That does not matter. Let us celebrate instead the dedication its members have shown in their own struggles for peace and social justice.