

Photos courtesy of the author



PART  
ONE OF  
TWO

# OHIO YEARLY MEETING GATHERING AND QUAKER SPRING

JOHN ANDREW GALLERY, WITH COMMENTS BY SUSAN SMITH

In 2014, I attended my first General Gathering of Conservative Friends and the Quaker Spring that followed it. If you asked me to describe what happened at either event—what was said or discussed, what new insights I obtained from attending—I would be unable to give any answer except to say that I found it spiritually nurturing. I had a long-standing, but generally unfulfilled, interest in the Conservative Friends tradition and welcomed the relaxed, peaceful atmosphere of Olney Friends School in Barnesville,

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*The second half of "Ohio Yearly Meeting Gathering and Quaker Spring" will appear in the May 2017 issue of Friends Journal.*

Ohio, where both events were held. My enjoyment was great enough that when the two events came around again in 2016, I signed up and eventually boarded a bus for the ten-hour ride from Philadelphia. This time there was so much that was significant to me that I decided to write this account of my attendance in order not to forget what I learned, and to be able to share it with others. To double check my recollections, I asked Susan Smith, another attendee at both events, to review this article. Her comments amplified my own in such a rich way that I decided to leave them in and have identified them.

The General Gathering of Conservative Friends is sponsored by Ohio Yearly Meeting and held from Friday—I should probably say Sixth Day—evening to First Day noon. This year it attracted about 30 participants. I have yet to figure out what

the purpose of this gathering is, and I think that is one of the reasons I enjoy it: it seems to have no purpose; it is simply a time for some Friends to renew their spiritual journeys.

**Susan Smith:** That, in fact, is the purpose: for attenders to renew (re-orient, re-energize, recommit, assess) their spiritual journeys (or conditions, practices, lives), of which renewal occurs not only through worship and Bible reading but also through fellowship with other people.

Leaving meals aside, the agenda is quite simple: Bible reading in the morning, followed by meeting for worship before lunch. There is free time in the afternoon, followed by another meeting for worship. Seventh Day night, there is a meeting for worship for sharing personal or general concerns, and on First Day, there's a final session of Bible reading and then meeting for worship is held with members of Barnesville's Stillwater Meeting. All sessions are held in the historic, and lofty, Stillwater Meetinghouse, which shares the site with Olney Friends School.



Opposite page:  
Stillwater  
Meetinghouse

Left: Swing on  
Olney Friends  
School grounds

In both 2014 and 2016, I learned that Conservative Friends have a different approach to speaking in meeting for worship from what I am used to. For one thing, they speak much longer than would be tolerated in any of the meetings I attend in Philadelphia. More importantly, their messages almost always begin with something from the Bible: a passage might be read without comment, or a message might begin by quoting or paraphrasing a Bible story and then move on to some general or personal observations. Rarely, however, would a message begin with personal experience, as is often the case in meetings I attend. As a result, the messages had a greater spiritual depth for me than ones I normally hear or give myself, even when I begin with something from the Gospels, as I often do.

## I SAID THAT I FELT I HAD LOST MY WAY

and didn't know how to find it again. I was certain that God had not abandoned me but that I seemed to have abandoned God. This was quite difficult for me to admit. It was the first time I had expressed these feelings publicly or even privately to anyone else.

**Susan Smith:** This is interesting: that regularly beginning messages spoken in worship with the gospel results in greater spiritual depth of messages. We have noticed that, too. Maybe the causal direction indicated in "as a result" doesn't matter, but I wonder about it. It could also be that using Scripture as a starting place for messages happens when the speaker is already in a place of greater spiritual depth, whereas regularly beginning with personal experience is more likely to signify a focus on oneself than on God's presence (or love, care, work) in this world.

In one meeting for worship, an older man in plain dress seated on the facing bench gave a lengthy message that included a phrase that was like an arrow going straight to my heart. "This is the way," he said; "walk in it." For several years now I have felt that I have lost my way spiritually, and this message brought forth the sadness I've felt about that. Both the message and feeling stayed with me, and so on Seventh Day evening, when invited to express personal concerns, I found myself led to speak. I said that I felt I had lost my way and didn't know how to find it again. I was certain that God had not abandoned me but that I seemed to have abandoned God. This was quite difficult for me to admit. It was the first time I had expressed these feelings publicly or even privately to anyone else. Merely being able to speak my concerns aloud was its own consolation and lifted some of the burden of despair I often feel.

**Susan Smith:** Yes, speaking one's concerns aloud is often a consolation, and can also open one's heart and mind to insights that were being blocked by the anguish of the concern.

Other Friends spoke of their concerns, both personal and general, and some Friends offered comments that might have been directed to any one of us, but I often felt were directed to me. None provided what might be called advice; it was more as if Friends were holding me in the Light verbally, if that makes any sense. One Friend quoted words of Isaac Pennington that, strangely enough, I had read earlier that day in a Pendle Hill pamphlet. "Give

Attendees of the General Gathering of Conservative Friends



## QUAKER SPRING BEGAN IN 2007

and draws about 50 participants from all parts of the United States and one or two from abroad. There is no specific agenda for the approximately five days (Third Day evening to First Day noon), although there is a schedule. The basic concept is to be open to the leading of the Spirit and the inspiration of those who attend.

over thine own willing; give over thine own running; give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down into the seed which God sows in thy heart, and let that be in thee and act in thee.” These words felt directly relevant to me. Other messages similarly spoke of not despairing in times of dryness but accepting them and waiting in expectant silence for change to come in its own time. It was, I felt, the sinking down into the seed, the expectant waiting in silence that was missing from my life.

On First Day morning, the Gathering was joined by members of Stillwater Meeting, some in plain dress including a family of what looked like two parents, three sons, and three daughters, whom I remembered from 2014. I am particularly impressed by young men who have made a strong commitment to a spiritual life—women, too, of course, but as a man, it is the men who affect me more. In Philadelphia, I often see young Mennonite men handing out leaflets about their faith or Mormon missionaries walking around, probably soon to increase as a result of the recent completion of a huge Mormon Temple in downtown Philadelphia. And of course I see many men, old and young, in traditional Muslim dress. What strikes me most about all of them is that they are so certain in their faith that they are willing to express it visibly in the clothes they wear. It is a certainty of faith that I feel I lack.

I often wonder if this apparent certainty is merely

the result of being raised in a family with a strong religious belief (I remember how certain I felt at an early age about the Catholicism I was raised in) or whether there has still been a time of personal conviction. So I approached one of the young men in plain dress with this question. He was generous enough to respond, saying first that of course his family upbringing had a great influence. But then he spoke quite passionately about what “we” believe, referring to a passage from Romans, which he first quoted then quickly opened his Bible to find so he could read it to me accurately. It was from Romans 12, I think, but I may not be remembering accurately; it was a further demonstration of how much the Bible is a ground of spiritual knowledge for Conservative Friends—and a reminder of how poorly I know it.

*Susan Smith:* Thee seems to want that deeper spiritual grounding. May I suggest intentional daily quiet reading of the Bible, staying in the New Testament but going beyond the four Gospel books? Go slowly. The object is not to check off parts read, but to sink down with little pieces, one by one in sequence until thee’s read a whole chapter and a whole book. Read as much in each session as thee has “outward” time for and inward focus. The books don’t have to be read in the order they come in the Bible. See where thee is led.

There is a break of about two and a half days between the General Gathering of Conservative Friends and the start of Quaker Spring. Both years I have been privileged to stay at Olney Friends School for those intervening days. The Gathering primes my pump, you might say, and the days in between allow me to rest, read, write, and prepare myself for the more intense agenda of Quaker Spring. Olney Friends School is located on a very simple but very beautiful campus, shared, as I said, with Stillwater Meeting. The school is small: 40 to 50 students housed in one small dormitory for boys and

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## Ohio Yearly Meeting Gathering and Quaker Spring (Part I)

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another for girls; and one main building that contains faculty offices, classrooms, library, dining hall, and gymnasium. In addition, there is a guesthouse; several small houses, one of which is Friends Center; and a new science center on the edge of the campus. All this is surrounded by playing fields, a pond with a small island reached by a distinctively designed bridge, and spacious lawns covered with fireflies in the July evening and planted with many different types of trees. I was told that 37 different species of birds have been identified on the site; nearly all of which, I can personally testify, begin chirping at 5 a.m. just before the sun begins to rise. Otherwise, it is very peaceful during the couple of days when I have been there alone, except for a few staff and a few summer farm-intern students.

Quaker Spring began in 2007 and draws about 50 participants from all parts of the United States and one or two from abroad. There is no specific agenda for the approximately five days (Third Day evening to First Day noon), although there is a schedule. The basic concept is to be open to the leading of the Spirit and the inspiration of those who attend. The schedule consists of Bible study and meeting for worship in the morning, two workshops or discussion groups in the afternoon, and then a panel discussion or talk in the evening. This year the content of the afternoon workshops and evening meetings was decided by the group as a whole, a new approach that seemed to work well.

**U**nlike Bible reading at the Conservative Friends Gathering, which consisted of simply reading passages without comment, Bible study at Quaker Spring includes comment and discussion. A highlight this year was an enactment of sections of the story of Joseph and his brothers, put on by two teenage boys—the only non-adults in attendance—with the support of a number of adults. The enactments

came with a series of queries to be discussed one-on-one with the person sitting next to you, and these, too, came like arrows to my heart.

Joseph is betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. One query was the obvious: Have you ever felt betrayed by someone you thought loved you? For me, the answer was immediate: my father. Betrayal is not the word I would usually use: abandoned in a psychological sense is what I generally feel, but the story and query made me realize that there was a sense of betrayal about it that I had not previously recognized, and that probably had a lot to do with the feeling of anger I carried for him. Joseph eventually forgives his brothers, and so the obvious query was: Have you forgiven? Again, for me, the answer was immediate: no, I had never forgiven him. I carried my anger, resentment, and disappointment to his death, much to my regret. It was only years later that I could acknowledge that he had done his best and that he had loved me even if it was not in the way I had hoped. Without these queries, I probably would not have seen the connection between Joseph's story and my own life, and would not have benefited from a new understanding of my own experience.

**I** attended three of the afternoon workshops and skipped the fourth to sneak away and play pocket billiards (pool), my secret avocation, having discovered a refurbished pool table in the student lounge. Two of the workshops consisted of sharing our spiritual journeys. I always find other people's stories inspiring and amazing, even though they also make me feel how little of real significance I've done myself. This was true in both these sessions. When I told my own story, I was surprised to find how emotional I still felt about my first experience at Quaker meeting, realizing that I had at last found a spiritual home. Telling my story also gave me the opportunity to speak again about the sense of being lost that I had spoken of at the General Gathering of Conservative Friends, and, once again, just the sharing of that gave me a sense of release and relief. □