

Baltimore Yearly Meeting Agency History



Baltimore Yearly Meeting is an association of individual Meetings from central Pennsylvania, Maryland except for its eastern shore, District of Columbia, and Virginia. The Yearly Meeting is the combination of two groups of unprogrammed Meetings (Hicksite and Orthodox) who consolidated in 1967. It has 40 member groups, ranging in size from 9 to 581 members.

The Yearly Meeting meets annually for business for nearly a week in August, and holds three interim one-day business meetings, as well. Leadership of the organization is provided by a volunteer Clerk. The organization has an executive director, a fund-raiser, two camp program staff, a part-time youth worker, a part-time bookkeeper and an office manager. The Yearly Meeting also runs four camping programs during the summer and employs part-time, temporary staff for this purpose.

Quakerism began in this area with the first European residents. Documents in Friends House, London indicate that books by Quaker authors were sent to people in Maryland and Virginia in 1656. The first Quaker visitor to preach in the Chesapeake Bay area was in 1655 (Elizabeth Harris). Indeed, three leading members of the Puritans then in control were converted by her. Visitors in Virginia, however, were whipped or arrested. Quakers petitioned Lord Baltimore for permission to settle in Maryland and many came from Virginia. During the Puritan rule of Maryland, Friends were persecuted.

Fox began to organize men's and women's meetings for business in 1656 and his epistles urged Friends in the Colonies to do so. The task of men's Meeting was to provide a place of worship; take care of the poor, the widows, orphans and the unemployed; settle differences among Friends; relieve the sufferings of Friends; keep a record of births, marriages, and deaths and see that marriages were properly performed. Women's Meetings also cared for the poor, the sick, and the prisoners and performed all tasks except those "that lack of experience in public affairs and modesty alike would prevent."

Maryland and Virginia Quakerism was established on a firm basis between 1665 and 1677 by missionaries. A General Meeting of Maryland Friends gathered at West River in April 1672 and West River Yearly Meeting was established. George Fox (founder) was present.

Meetings were established by 1739. Quarterly meetings were 2-3 day events; Yearly Meeting sessions lasted 4-6 days. Quakerism expanded between 1650 and 1750. In 1700 William Penn and Lord and Lady Baltimore visited Yearly Meeting. Friends represented a cross section of colonial society.

The Monthly Meeting gradually assumed a profoundly formative social influence over the lives of its members. The Meeting became the center, spiritually, intellectually and economically of the Quaker community. The group settled disputes between members, provided for the poor, took care of marriages and sustained a high level of moral life.

In 1775, there were 60 meetinghouses in Virginia. Friends moved from Pennsylvania. When the tide of western migration took place the Virginia Meetings lost many members. On the Eastern Shore, the Meetings that were established when persecuted Friends moved north from Virginia were the first to disappear. One, Third Haven in Easton, remains, as a member of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Friends declined in number in the 18th and 19th centuries for many reasons, among them: large plantation owners were out of step with the progressing humanitarian ideas of later Friends, the growth of Methodism, and the practice of disowning all members who married out of Meeting.

Maryland Yearly Meeting exchanged with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1790. Those Friends on the Eastern Shore of Maryland went to Pennsylvania and Friends in central Pennsylvania and Virginia came to Maryland. Maryland Yearly Meeting changed its name to Baltimore Yearly Meeting.

Quakers and Slavery

BYM mounted its opposition to slavery in 1770. In 1778, the owners of slaves were expelled from the Yearly Meeting. By 1790 none of the Yearly Meeting members owned slaves.

Quakers and Peace

From 1759, BYM had a peace testimony, and Friends maintained a testimony against war during the Revolutionary war. In Virginia, Friends who refused to serve in the militia were fined, deprived of electoral privileges, forbidden to hold office, sue for debts, serve as jurors and buy land. Twenty prominent Friends were sent from Philadelphia to Winchester Virginia to spend a winter. During the Civil War Quakers were exempted from the draft on payment of \$300 per person with the money used for non-military purposes. The Confederate Draft act exempted Friends on payment of \$500 or furnishing of a substitute.

Quakers and Education

In 1815, the YM owned and operated, briefly, the Fair Hill Boarding School at Sandy Spring, Maryland. The school was closed in 1826 and the property sold at more than twice its original value in 1865. Day schools were the “backbone of the system of Quaker education” and existed widely until the 1870’s. As public school systems expanded, only Baltimore, Washington, and Sandy Spring eventually had schools. Each Meeting built its own library and received Quaker literature. Meetings also had active “first day” schools to teach the faith. In the late 1900’s a number of new Friends Schools were founded, with at least eight in existence in the beginning of the 21st century.

Quakers and Native Americans

An Indian Affairs Committee was founded in 1795. Indians still existed on a local basis. Quakers sought laws to stop alcohol sales to Native Americans. They also tried to prevent removal of Indians. In 1867 members of the six Hicksite Yearly Meetings appealed to congress on behalf of Native Americans. President Grant appointed Quakers as Indian agents – a system that worked until 1878.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of a new evangelicalism. However, Baltimore Yearly Meeting was 4/5 “Hicksite” – contrary to evangelicalism and insistent on the spirit of Christ acting within the individual. The Yearly Meeting split in 1828 without rancor. About 500 people joined the “orthodox” Yearly Meeting. By 1963 the membership of this group had grown to 1,234. The Hicksites retained all the land which had belonged to Baltimore Yearly Meeting except for Hopewell Friends Meeting in rural Virginia. After forty years, the Hicksites opened communications to the Orthodox “to give a just share of all property held by us” which amounted

to 1/5 of the share of the Fair Hill property, 1/5 of the sale of the pasture lot in Baltimore, and 1/5 of the value of the Lombard Street Meetinghouse (site of Yearly Meeting).

Baltimore Yearly Meeting- Hicksite built a new meeting house on Park Avenue in Baltimore for \$65,000 in 1925. This was a place for a local Meeting and for Yearly Meeting sessions. It had a two-story meeting room seating 600; a literature room for 200, a parlor and a library. The basement held a dining room which would seat 100 at a time with complete kitchen and storage facilities. Yearly Meeting was held in this building until 1943.

Both Orthodox and Hicksite Meetings created organizations to bring together groups of Yearly Meetings. In 1902 Five Years Meeting was established by 11 Orthodox Yearly Meetings; Canada did not join. This group had already created a statement of belief and a uniform Discipline. Baltimore Yearly Meeting-Orthodox gave general approval to it, but did not "adopt" it. Hicksite Friends began gathering in 1892, and Friends General Conference was established in 1900. This group was more informal, meeting every two years for general meetings, and establishing a central committee of representatives to work on common concerns.

Hicksite Friends began to decline before WWI. Yearly Meeting began an active outreach program to local Meetings and hired a general secretary. Speakers from outside the Yearly Meeting were engaged. Young Friends were organized in 1918 and helped with advancement by a series of weekend conferences. Several new meetings were formed and membership grew again between 1917 and 1921. Camp Keewadin was established in 1922 by Baltimore Monthly Meeting and became site of Young Friends activities and leadership training, as well as family camp.

Orthodox Yearly Meeting also employed a field secretary. Several new meetings were formed. Orthodox Yearly Meetings were growing, but some small meetings in Pennsylvania closed. A site in Baltimore was purchased in 1917 for the construction of a Yearly Meeting site.

Orthodox Friends were engaged around the world in missionary work. Hicksite Friends participated in AFSC's work supporting relief activities in areas of tension. The two Yearly Meetings had a Joint Peace Committee after 1920. Young Friends met jointly and formed one body in 1931. Yearly Meetings found a growing fellowship beginning in the 1920s. In Washington DC a joint committee of two local Meetings was appointed in 1930 to consider a

cooperative Meeting for Worship and Friends Center in the city. The building was completed in January 1931. A brief set of precepts, rather than the usual Book of Discipline, was adopted in 1938. In 1944 Friends Meeting of Washington was accepted as a United Monthly Meeting by both Baltimore Yearly Meetings, although it was not a part of either's local Quarter. During the depression, both Yearly Meetings began to charge a registration to attend YM sessions.

In 1930, Friends General Conference recommended that Meetings accept members from other Meetings who applied for membership; until then a subsequent membership process was required. Beginning in 1931 some evening sessions of both Hicksite and Orthodox Yearly Meetings were held in common.

A major emphasis between 1920 and 1939 was on warnings of the dangers and consequences of war. A federation of national peace organizations was formed, as was a Friends Council on Disarmament. Friends volunteered in the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the League of Women Voters. They worked against the founding of the Reserve Officers Training Corps in land-grant colleges. Young Friends were well represented at the second Friends World Conference at Swarthmore and Haverford in 1937.

During the years of the Second World War, Friends devoted major efforts to draft counseling and raising funds for the Civilian Public Service Camps. The cost of the camps for men classified "4E" – those whose conscience did not allow them to enter the armed forces – was born by the religious bodies from which they came. The services of these groups included soil conservation, reforestation, working in mental hospitals and schools. A few groups of men participated in medical experiments. Of course, some Friends served in the military, as well. Some chose to go to prison rather than accept any form of alternative service.

During the 1960's and 1970's many people became Friends who had found in the faith a mystical approach to religion or an answer to their personal search for a spiritual tradition. Some appreciated the lack of a creed; others of good-will but not pacifists also joined. Many Friends objected to the Vietnam War; a few took extraordinary actions to demonstrate opposition. Young Friends attended work camps throughout the world, and more took non-combatant service in the Armed Services or chose alternative Services than previously.

Beginning in 1957, the joint sessions of Baltimore Yearly Meeting were held at Western Maryland College in Westminster. The closing minute of the last session of the two Baltimore Yearly Meetings, August 9, 1967, read: "After years of increasing the number of joint activities of the two Baltimore Yearly Meetings, we come to the last moments of this transition experience. In thankfulness for our growing understanding and love, we propose in the Providence of God to meet in August 1968 as Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends." This reunification process had taken 45 years of effort. Young Friends had joined in 1931. Sandy Spring and Ashton Meetings united in 1949, as did the two groups of Friends at Deer Creek, Goose Creek, and Hopewell. A united Quarterly Meeting was formed in Washington in 1951. Both Yearly Meetings accepted membership in the World Council of Churches. Friends Meetings participated in the work of church councils in the cities where those were available. In 1959, a cooperating committee of the two Yearly Meetings acknowledged the reuniting of Yearly Meetings in Philadelphia, New York, New England and Canada. In 1963 a joint committee of five members from each Baltimore yearly meeting was appointed. This group met many times and compared the theological truths of the two yearly meetings but could not agree on a single theological basis. A new Committee of Fourteen was appointed in 1964 to seek an organizational, not theological, basis for unity. This group proposed that Monthly Meetings could belong to either of two sections – or both. A document with details concerning appointments, budgets, and functions of the sections was drawn up. The Yearly Meetings approved a proposed Manual of Procedure in 1967.

Sandy Spring Friends School was founded in 1958 and joined by Friends House Retirement Community in 1967. A consolidated Yearly Meeting Office and homestead was completed on the same property in 1970. This facility continues to be used, although in 2008, it is beginning to be too small.

Friends House, a corporation, was established in 1948 by the Board of three members from each of three Meetings of Baltimore Yearly Meeting. Those founding Meetings were the Alexandria Meeting, Friends Meeting of Washington and the Irvin Street Meeting. Later over time, they eventually got that Quarterly Meeting to petition Yearly Meeting so that Yearly Meeting took elder care on as a care and concern of the whole Yearly Meeting. The purpose was to establish a home for needy Friends and others. This group was part of the Yearly Meeting at the time it considered creating a Friends Center in Sandy Spring. When Friends House was created, a new Board structure was created. Baltimore Yearly Meeting nominates a

majority of the Board members; the Board itself nominates some of its Board members. All must be Quakers. The Board is expected to report to Annual Sessions of Baltimore Yearly Meeting. A written report is always distributed and in some years an oral report is also given.

Baltimore Yearly Meeting also appoints, through its Nominating Committee and approved by Annual Sessions, five representatives to the AFSC Corporation, the legal body which appoints the Board of AFSC, and a representative to the Middle Atlantic Region Executive Committee. That representative annually reports to the Yearly Meeting, and a written report is received from the staff of AFSC, as well.

In 2008, Friends Meeting School approached Baltimore Yearly Meeting and asked for support. The clerk of BYM asked committees to consider the implications of such a request and to hear a report, coordinated by the committee of Ministry and Pastoral Care, at Annual Sessions in 2009.

Baltimore Yearly Meeting grew in membership and in Meetings after World War II, and continues to grow. Growth began in the Washington DC area and later moved into Virginia. Growth at the end of the century has been predominantly in southern Virginia. Membership in the Yearly Meeting was reported as 4,784 in 2008.



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