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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF QTDG AND *QRT*

KATE NEWLIN

The Quaker Theological Discussion Group began in 1957 as an informal interest group of a variety of Friends focused on the exploration of Friends faith and theology. As Wilmer Cooper, one of the group's original proponents and its first chairman, wrote in a general letter to Friends with interests in theology, "At the Conference of Friends in the Americas, several individual Friends met informally and expressed the concern to establish a continuing study and discussion group on Quaker theology. The objective is not to formulate a Quaker creed but to explore more fully the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience."¹ That same letter named a number of well-known Friends: Hugh Barbour, Wilmer Cooper, Maurice Creasy, T. Canby Jones, Edward Manice, and Charles Thomas, as members of the initial Steering Committee. Two months after this general letter, Cooper wrote to the Committee, "In addition to around 50 subscriptions we have had many interesting and enthusiastic letters. There seems to be a growing sense of expectancy."² The group quickly generated interest among Friends and began to discuss the objectives and mode of operation for a more permanent, standing interest group.

In November 1958 the group, now officially calling itself the "Quaker Theological Discussion Group" (QTDG), met at Kirkridge and began to make plans to publish a journal, *Quaker Religious Thought* (*QRT*), with J. Calvin Keene to serve as its first editor.³ The February 1959 edition of the QTDG NewsNotes reported this as the "development of a medium of communication in the form of a publication which can help to bind together the interests of the group and serve as a forum for the exchange of views on Quaker theological subjects."⁴ The first issue of *QRT* was printed and distributed later in 1959, featuring an article by well-known Friend Howard Brinton on "The Quaker Doctrine of the Holy Spirit." Still considered an experiment, it was printed on fourteen pages of standard, 8 ½ by 11 paper, bound by three staples inside blue cardstock front and back covers. A single issue was priced at 35 cents. The first issue was

very well-received. Late in the year, editor Calvin Keene wrote to his Editorial Committee, “Ed Manice, circulation manager, reports that the original printing of 500 copies is now entirely sold out and rather thinks we should print another 500 of it! I personally find this amazing, since I had no idea we would have such a demand.”⁵ The second issue was published in the fall of 1959, and in summing up the year in a letter to the Steering Committee, Wilmer Cooper wrote, “Calvin Keene is doing an excellent job as our editor, and I am more and more convinced that this publication should be our major activity.”⁶

In addition to the decision to publish *QRT* on an experimental basis, those who gathered at KirkrIDGE in late 1958 also decided to hold a National Conference of the *QTDG* during 1959. It was held June 28 to July 2, 1959 at Barnesville School in Ohio. During the planning process, Wilmer Cooper spent a lot of time considering key people he felt it would be important to have present, and he engaged in a fair amount of correspondence to invite individuals personally. In March 1959, he wrote to a Friend, “My purpose for writing is to ask whether you might feel an interest in attending a national conference of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group.... I recall your hesitancy about too much emphasis on theology and perhaps you could be a real help by being present and restraining those who tend to be too theologically inclined.”⁷ The business session at the conference determined that Cooper and Ed Manice would continue as chairman and treasurer, respectively, of *QTDG*, and that the success of *QRT* justified its continuation with Keene continuing as editor and Manice as circulation manager.⁸ The conference itself went well and became a regular, biennial event for the Discussion Group. With the creation of the journal and the success of their first conference, the *QTDG* revised its original statement of purpose to a more lasting mission statement:

The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to seek a consensus (or unity) of faith and action among all groups of Friends by trying to discover, clarify, make relevant and apply the claims of truth as expressed in the Christian Gospel and the vision of early Friends to the life situation of men of the Twentieth Century. Our primary method for doing this is by discussion of issues of faith and life in our journal, *Quaker Religious Thought*, and in conferences held at regular intervals where freedom of theological discussion is encouraged.⁹

In this formative period, it was necessary for the group, and Cooper and Keene in particular, to address the character of *Quaker Religious Thought*, including what was published and who their audience was. Early in 1961, Ed Manice raised the possibility of reprinting an article from another publication that dealt critically with the issue of capital punishment. Though the issue of capital punishment was certainly one that Cooper shared a concern about, his thoughts on the consequences of including the article in *QRT* demonstrated a great deal of foresight:

Although I did not write to raise any objections about including the capital punishment enclosure with the forthcoming issue of *QRT*, I do question the wisdom of this. At least I would not want to see us establish this as a policy because I think we could run into many difficult decisions about what to permit in our mailings and what not to. Sometime I would like to see us devote an issue of *QRT* to the implications of our faith for social issues, but I'd like to see it dealt with in *QRT* and not via supplementary enclosures.¹⁰

Quaker Religious Thought was not meant to be a means of disseminating a large amount of information that attended to Friends' various interests, but rather, a forum of theological discussion. Consideration and decision on this particular occasion (the enclosure was not included) undoubtedly played a part in shaping guidelines for content appropriate to the publication.

The success of the publication also suggested the need to reconsider exactly who their audience was. In May of 1960, Cooper wrote to Ed Manice and Calvin Keene suggesting that they get together to consider long term policy for *QRT*, "Apparently it has the potentiality of becoming a bigger thing than we anticipated. For instance, I have had some reservations about trying to sell it to every taker in the Society of Friends, but I am willing to be convinced this is the kind of publication it should become."¹¹ Within a year, Cooper did seem to be convinced of *QRT*'s wider audience. In a letter to the Steering Committee summarizing the 1961 summer conference, he reported, "Enthusiastic support was given to *Quaker Religious Thought* and the able manner in which it is being edited by J. Calvin Keene.... An attempt will be made to expand the circulation of *QRT* through college, university and seminary libraries, as well as other media."¹² Thus, *QRT* made the jump from a publication intended for

a small minority among Friends to a Quaker theological journal of general interest intended for both Friends and non-Friends alike.

The business session at the 1961 conference also committed to hold a third national QTDG conference two years hence in the summer of 1963 using the theme “Christian Commitment and Quaker Social Concern.”¹³ This conference was really the first in which the Discussion Group made an effort to reach out to other groups in the Society of Friends by inviting people involved in the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) to be active participants in the conference. In a letter to Keene, Cooper related his thoughts on the conference and how it could somewhat fulfill his vision of the role of *QRT*/QTDG within the Society.

I am not sure how aware you are of the life and death struggle the AFSC, and to a lesser extent FCNL, have been and are going through in their relationship with Friends. The basic issues are theological and historical in essence, and they need to be dealt with at a theological level. It is here that I am convinced QTDG and *QRT* can be of great service to Friends.... I have had a strong conviction from the beginning of QTDG that sooner or later we should involve ourselves in dialogue with many different Quaker groups who are more concerned with the application of our faith, and that our role is to help them develop some theological perspective on what they are doing.¹⁴

The fruits of Cooper’s vision can be observed in browsing subsequent issues of *QRT*. Most early issues were solely consideration of the Quaker views on various theological themes. Though continuing this important work, later issues also began to highlight the application of these views to issues such as ecumenism, education, service, and more.

In addition to hosting another successful national conference, 1963 also brought many changes and upheaval to the group. A full turnover in leadership began with the resignations of both Ed Manice and Calvin Keene at the 1963 conference. Prior to the conference, Manice (at the time trying to finish up a doctorate at Yale) wrote to Cooper, “I decided I was spending too much time on various extracurricular activities... [and] felt the best time to shed my involvement as Treasurer of the QTDG and as Circulation Manager of *QRT* would be at the regular Barnesville Conference.”¹⁵

Earlier in the year, Calvin Keene seemed to be slightly disillusioned with the group, which perhaps led ultimately to his resignation as editor of *QRT* just before the conference. In January, he wrote of his frustrations to Ed Manice, Wilmer Cooper, and John McCandless, “I feel that far too few are actually active in anything we are doing. It is almost entirely the four of us who have kept most busy and active, and I think it a valid principle that strong interest is aroused only where there is strong involvement.”¹⁶ Both resignations were accepted at the conference held July 16-19 at Barnesville, with T. Canby Jones to take on the editorship, Bainbridge and Virginia Davis to oversee the QT DG Treasury, and James and Beverly Vaughan to take over Circulation of *QRT*.¹⁷

The first two years following these changes were very hard for the group and its publication. Early in 1964, Wilmer Cooper wrote to the QT DG Steering Committee, “It is uncertain whether the new arrangement will work, but at least we want to try it this year. Unfortunately the transition from Ed has not gone smoothly.”¹⁸ The arrangement did not end up working well, severely affecting the financial stability of the publication. In private correspondence, Cooper wrote, “Things are going very badly for *QRT*. We are in the red something over \$100 and have nothing to print the already overdue fall issue with.”¹⁹ The stress of it seemed to have caught up by early 1965 when he wrote to the Steering Committee, “QT DG and *QRT* operate in a true existential manner, namely, they move from one crisis to another barely surviving the last. I am submitting my resignation as chairman of QT DG effective at conference time next summer.”²⁰ By the end of the summer of 1964, the ongoing turnover in leadership was concluded as A. Burns Chalmers succeeded Wilmer Cooper as chairman of QT DG and Vail Palmer was approved as Treasurer of QT DG and Circulation Manager for *QRT*. This new change, especially the pairing of Treasurer and Circulation Manager duties with one person as it had been with Ed Manice, seemed to work out well, and Palmer soon had *QRT* back on a more firm financial footing.

Though no doubt aware of the maelstrom surrounding the publication, Canby Jones seemed to fall right in to his role as editor of *QRT*. His commitment to the values highlighted in the group’s mission statement, in particular giving voice to the theological diversity present among Friends, was evident. In August of 1964, he wrote to his editorial committee:

Now, concerning general criteria for choosing commentators. Wide geographical and Yearly Meeting representation is I feel desirable but secondary. I am more interested in getting divergent theological viewpoints represented. But most of all I feel we want to get the people as commentators who really have something to say on the subject at hand; thus making the dialogue in *QRT* dynamic and exciting.²¹

It seems as though Jones' skills and personality were also appreciated. In response to Jones' suggestions regarding article commentators and the broad list of names that he had suggested, Cooper wrote, "I very much like your letter which gives some clearly thought out alternatives for critiques and criteria, etc. It should elicit some good responses."²² Jones' interest in Quaker ecumenicity made him a valuable resource for *QRT* and the aims of QTGD to include as much of Friends' diversity within its fold as possible.

The earlier discussion regarding the audience of *QRT* was revisited at a Steering Committee meeting in May of 1965, in which there was much discussion about the future of the group and its evolution: "Is QRTDG in danger of becoming the preserve of 'professional theologians' alienating the 'untrained?' This was felt to be a recognizable tendency but not a serious danger."²³ A renewed sense of direction was articulated in the minutes: "QRTDG cannot afford to become a regional group. It must have national concern and appeal. Strategy to reach eastern liberalism and mid-west churchianity may differ but the central concern must remain: the restoration of free, Christ-centered theologically articulate Quakerism."²⁴ The group was clear to continue widening their base of appeal within and without the Society of Friends.

One of the most popular issues of *QRT* up to that point was perhaps a response to this, particularly the concern that *QRT* seemed to constantly be in danger of being too academic and/or intellectual. Published in the winter of 1967-68, issue #18 featured a lead article by Rob Tucker, "Revolutionary Faithfulness." A journalist by trade, Tucker made clear in numerous letters over the course of the summer and fall of 1967 that his article was not intended to be a scholarly work. In October he reiterated this sentiment in a letter to Jones regarding some editorial feedback, "I am worried, have been for some time, by over-academicism in *QRT*, and am particularly anxious not to be pushed into that mold." In Tucker's view, some of Jones' editorial suggestions "seemed purely stylistic and from my view made the

writing less idiosyncratic, and that was what I was worrying about and trying to caution against.”²⁵ Tucker and Jones did reach an adequate compromise, and the issue became one of *QRT*'s best sellers.

A new feature to the format of *Quaker Religious Thought*, letters to the editor, emerged in the Spring 1968 issue. Prior to its publication, Jones wrote to the Steering Committee, “*QRT* with the forthcoming issue is inaugurating a new policy of inviting rebuttal type articles to appear in future issues, and inviting letters to the editor on any substantive issue of theological concern.”²⁶ Jones was diplomatic in attending to the many voices and personalities present in continuing: “This new policy will be agreeable to several of you who have been calling for it for the last five years. Those of you who have reservations about it please send on your suggestions on how such contributions may be controlled so as not ‘to louse up’ our beautiful blue journal.”²⁷ He did receive a reply from Lewis Benson who wrote, “I am aware that there are special editorial problems connected with *QRT*. Its special dialogic style is a very strong feature, yet it is also very limiting. I like *QRT* the way it is—I am not agitating for a change of policy, although I can see that a time for change may come and, perhaps, sooner than we expect.”²⁸ As with numerous other things in the Quaker world, change and innovation within *QRT* was a gradual and intentional occurrence.

In July of 1968, the Quaker Theological Discussion Group hosted another national conference at Powell House in New York addressing “The Universal and Christian Dimensions of Quakerism.” The registration form for the gathering summarized the goal of the conference:

To explore in dept a major problem arising in modern Quakerism—the differences that exist between Friends who affirm the necessity of remaining true to the Christian origins of Quakerism and those who maintain that we are living in a post-Christian era and are being led by continuing revelation into a universal or inclusive faith. The aim of the conference is to bring together leading Friends with differing view points in the faith that an atmosphere of trust and openness can bring a true dialogue, a beginning search for a unified direction.²⁹

Reminiscent of Wilmer Cooper’s zeal for the early conferences, Canby Jones had a considerable amount of energy and enthusiasm for the topic, and in all his correspondence of the late summer and early fall, seemingly regardless of correspondent, he took a few lines

to rave about the success of the conference. In a letter to the Steering Committee reporting on the events of the conference, Jones' fervor (and his humor) is evident:

The Powell House Conference, a unique and exciting event, was a true fruit of the call at Friends World Conference to "creative encounter." In the past on some occasions we have invited in and given a theological grilling to a few "liberal type Friends." This time numbers were balanced. No one was defensive. All were offensive, whoops what am I saying? I mean everyone spoke his mind very forthrightly. I kept thinking that this was the modern equivalent of an early Quaker threshing meeting but with the uncanny new dimension that we accepted one another in love even as we differed on basic faith assumptions.³⁰

Jones' thoughts on the event were just as enthusiastic in a private letter to Chard Smith regarding an article Smith had written for the conference, and which had then become a possibility for a future issue of *QRT*. Jones wrote, "Rereading your paper certainly brought the Powell House gathering vividly back to me. I am still rejoicing in the experience. It was a unique encounter and a wonderful success, I feel. Not the least element of which was coming to find a lasting and deep friendship with you."³¹

The Discussion Group and *QRT* experienced a second turnover in leadership in the winter of 1968-69. In June 1967, QTGD chairman Burns Chalmers wrote to Canby Jones from the hospital requesting him to call and chair a meeting of the Steering Committee and to include on the agenda discussion of replacing Chalmers if they felt it necessary.³² In October 1967, Chalmers officially resigned as chairman due to limitations placed on him by some health problems, and Jones was seen as "the obvious person to act as chairman for this interim period" before the group could meet and nominate a new chair.³³

Jones played the dual role of editor and chairman throughout 1968 as the Discussion Group dealt with the shake up that Chalmers' resignation appears to have kicked off. At first it appeared the issue was simply one of finding a new chairman, but in November of 1967, *QRT* printer John McCandless wrote Jones, "I agree with you that editor and chairman is too much to handle on a long term basis, tho it should be pointed out that your five years would be over with the issue after our next summer conference or meeting. So maybe you ought to be thinking about your future relationship. This is not to suggest that I think editorship ought to be limited to five years."³⁴

Shortly thereafter, Jones sent out a draft copy of an encyclical for the Steering Committee to McCandless, among others, to which McCandless replied:

I did not “gently remind” you that your term was “up” and you ought to be replaced: I do not see any objection to a 7 or 10 year editorship; I only pointed that out in the context of your saying you were not eligible for chairmanship because you had to finish your term. It seems to me that the whole slate of officers needs to be reviewed; all I wanted to point out to you personally in raising the fact that you will have been editor 5 years is that you are obviously a leading candidate for either office and you ought to give some thought to which you feel you want to do before you get there as you are likely to be asked that.³⁵

It seems that this Jones/McCandless correspondence in late 1967 introduced and got the ball rolling as to the question of a possible new editor for *Quaker Religious Thought*, in addition to a new QTDG chairman. In February 1968, looking ahead at the business for the coming summer, Jones wrote the Steering Committee, “Back to the Powell House Conference, we will obviously need to have a QTDG business meeting. Major items will be the appointment of a new chairman and a new editor.”³⁶ In an April 1968 letter to Jones, Wilmer Cooper suggested the name of Francis Hall as chairman of QTDG, but other than this, there doesn’t seem to be much record of anybody except Jones ever seriously considered for the chairman position.³⁷ Jones was the preference of outgoing chairman, Burns Chalmers, who wrote to Jones in May, “I would certainly be very enthusiastic if you could undertake the chairmanship of QTDG. You would give the kind of leadership we very much need. I must say that you have done a superb job as editor of *QRT* for the past 5 years.”³⁸

Wilmer Cooper did have plenty more to say, however, about his concern about the editorship of *QRT*:

In seeking new leadership I think we should keep in mind the basic nature and purpose of the organization and its publication *QRT*. In a sense we have a specific mission to perform, namely, to explore the Christian basis and stance for a vital Quakerism in the future. This should never be undertaken in any narrow sense and should be completely open to relating itself to other points of view, including other world religions. At the same time I think we must be clear where we start. I would like to nominate Chris

Downing as editor of *QRT*. If she can not consider it I would be open to having Arthur Roberts considered as editor.³⁹

Indeed, throughout the spring of 1968, the two leading candidates for the editorship of *QRT* were Chris Downing and Arthur Roberts, both college professors at Rutgers in New Jersey and George Fox in Oregon, respectively. Lewis Benson also gave the position some consideration but in the end, effectively declined.⁴⁰ It is evident that there was a certain amount of anxiety within the group throughout the spring of 1968 around a change in editor and that discerning the “right” choice was very important to many. Stating quite clearly the importance of the editorial post, Benson wrote in private correspondence to Jones, “*QRT* is, in fact, the people who produce it and it could easily change its character. I hope no hasty decision will be made about the editorship and I hope you can keep up the good work you have been doing until it is very clear that we can safely make a change. I am not as keen as some are for frequent changes in the editorship.”⁴¹

In May, Jones wrote to Chris Downing to sound out her interest in the editorship. Jones wrote, “Would you be willing to have your name suggested as editor of *QRT* at our Powell House QT DG conf. in July? QT DG and *QRT* are just on the threshold of a new appeal to Friends...please give the editorship prayerful consideration.”⁴² Downing’s initial reply was non-committal, but she did eventually decide to accept the offer of editing *QRT*. In a September 1968 letter to the Steering Committee reporting on the summer business meeting at Powell House, Jones writes: “It was the clear leading of the group that Chris Downing should be asked to serve as editor to succeed Canby Jones. Canby was therefore ‘kicked upstairs’ to chairman after five years of service as editor.”⁴³ In the Winter 1968-69 issue of *QRT*, Jones’ last as editor, he wrote in the editorial, “Greetings and blessings to Chris Downing...as she takes over the reins of editorship of *Quaker Religious Thought*. I bequeath her many headaches, some real joys and an increasing sense of meaningful accomplishment as QT DG and its journal become an increasing influence in Quaker religious renewal.”⁴⁴

In its first decade of existence, the Quaker Theological Discussion Group and its publication, *Quaker Religious Thought*, became an established presence within the Society of Friends. The quick success of *QRT* provided the opportunity and challenge of serving a diverse audience, and the national conferences the group hosted consistently

provided Friends with a forum for discussion of some of the most pressing, and potentially explosive, issues within the Society. In that time, they also survived two major turnovers in leadership, coming through both with a solid vision of and commitment to their direction and ministry to the Religious Society of Friends.

ENDNOTES

1. Wilmer Cooper to Friends (General letter), 10 September 1957, Quaker Theological Discussion Group Manuscript Collection (Box 5, File “Some Early QTDG Information 1956-57”), Quaker Archives, Lilly Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana. Appreciation is expressed to the Earlham archivists and their work for much of the background of this essay.
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4. QTDG NewsNotes, February 1959, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “QTDG NewsNotes”).
5. Calvin Keene to *QRT* Editorial Committee, 8 November 1959, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1959”).
6. Cooper to QTDG Steering Committee, 26 December 1959, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1959”).
7. Cooper to Gilbert Kilpack, 10 March 1959, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1959”).
8. QTDG NewsNotes, November 1959, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “QTDG NewsNotes”).
9. QTDG Statement of Purpose, 1958/59(?), QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “Some Early QTDG Information 1956-57”).
10. Cooper to Keene and Manice, 1 January 1961, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1961”).
11. Cooper to Manice and Keene, 20 May 1960, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1960”).
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13. Cooper to QTDG Steering Committee, 18 January 1962, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1962”).
14. Cooper to Keene, 26 March 1962, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1962”).
15. Manice to Cooper, 9 July 1963, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1963”).
16. Keene to Manice, Cooper, McCandless, 29 January 1963, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 5, File “1963”).
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- 18 Cooper to QTGD Steering Committee, 20 February 1964, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 5, File "1964").
- 19 Cooper to Nuhn, 5 January 1965, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 5, File "1965").
- 20 Cooper to QTGD Steering Committee, 12 February 1965, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 5, File "1965").
- 21 Jones to Editorial Committee, 31 August 1964, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 5, File "1964").
- 22 Cooper to Jones, 5 September 1964, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 5, File "1964").
- 23 Minutes of QTGD Steering Committee meeting, 1 May 1965, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 2, File "QTGD Steering Committee").
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Tucker to Jones, 10 October 1967, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 1, File "*QRT* IX:2 Fall 1967").
- 26 Jones to QTGD Steering Committee, 26 February 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 2, File "Steering Committee").
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Benson to Jones, 7 March 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 4, File "*QRT* Winter 1968-69 X:2").
- 29 National Conference Registration. 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 2, File "QTGD Conferences #3").
- 30 Jones to QTGD Steering Committee, 3 September 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 1, File "QTGD Fall 68").
- 31 Jones to Smith, 17 September 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 1, File "QTGD Fall 68").
- 32 Chalmers to Jones, 21 June 1967, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 1, File "*QRT* IX:2 Fall 1967").
- 33 McCandless to QTGD Executive Committee, 23 October 1967, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 1, File "QTGD Fall 68").
- 34 McCandless to Jones, 13 November 1967, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 1, File "*QRT* IX:2 Fall 1967").
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- 36 Jones to QTGD Steering Committee, 26 February 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 1, File "QTGD Fall 68").
- 37 Cooper to Jones, 12 April 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 1, File "QTGD Fall 68").
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- 39 Cooper to Jones, 12 April 1968.
- 40 Benson to Jones, 25 June 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 4, File "*QRT* Summer 1968 X:1").
- 41 Benson to Jones, 18 June 1968, QTGD Manuscripts (Box 4, File "*QRT* Summer 1968 X:1").

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42 Jones to Downing, 14 May 1968, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 1, File "QTDG Fall 68").

43 Jones to QTDG Steering Committee, 3 September 1968, QTDG Manuscripts (Box 1, File "QTDG Fall 68").

44 Editorial, *Quaker Religious Thought* Vol. 10:2 (1968).