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Probing Questions for a Forward-Looking People

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PROBING QUESTIONS

for a forward-looking people

BY PAUL ANDERSON

AT THE risk of oversimplifying recent Quaker developments in America, we could consider the 1950s "a decade of rediscovery and redefinition" among Friends. The 1952 World Gathering at Oxford, England, produced a renewed interest in rediscovering the historical roots of Quakerism, and in 1956 the Association of Evangelical Friends adopted a constitution. This was also a time in which several young Quaker scholars began to make contributions that would continue over several decades.

The 1960s could be considered "a decade of reorganization and testing" among Friends. In 1965 we see the transition of Five Years Meeting into Friends United Meeting, the development of the Association of Evangelical Friends into the Evangelical Friends Alliance, and the gathering of Friends of all Wilburite, or Conservative, extraction at Barnesville, Ohio. Along with these organizational developments came the turbulent 1960s in

America, a time in which Friends sought to make a redemptive difference in various ways.

The 1970s could be considered "a decade of dialogue and outreach" among Friends. Beginning with the St. Louis Conference in 1970, the Faith and Life movement led to significant dialogue among Friends. Also, the 1977 Wichita gathering of Friends in the Americas offered ample opportunity for Friends of different traditions to experience the joys and woes of seeking "unity amidst diversity." We also see in the 1970s the emergence of the first National Friends Ministers' Conference, held at Dallas, Texas, in 1976; and in 1975 we see the first of the national gatherings of Friends youth entitled "Youthquake." Outreach during the 1970s was exemplified by the starting of new mission fields, the development of the "Evangelical Friends Mission," various interracial and intercultural ministries among Friends, and numerous relief projects initiated by Friends.

While it is uncertain what else will transpire in the 1980s, so far the 1980s could be considered "a decade of increased global awareness" among Friends. Taking into account that the four previous World Gatherings had been held in either North America or England, the 1982 International Conference was held in Kaimosi, Kenya, home of the largest yearly meeting in the world. However, this shift was not simply a matter of correcting former negligence. It reflected the recognition that Friends in developing nations have an important contribution to make to contemporary Quakerism. At the 1985 World Gathering of Young Friends the Latin American and African Friends ministered powerfully, and it is becoming more and more evident that the spiritual fire of Friends in the Southern Hemisphere is much needed in the rest of the Quaker world and beyond. Therefore, strong feelings of mutuality are developing between Friends in the Southern and Northern Hemispheres. This recognition is represented by the holding of the 1986 Youthquake in Mexico and the scheduling of the 1987 International Friends Conference on Evangelism in Guatemala.

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Having considered recent trends and developments among Friends, one becomes acutely aware that with the completion of one chapter a new one begins. Therefore, the ongoing heritage of Quakerism continues to unfold. As we consider the past, we find our focus being drawn also to the present and future. Awareness of spiritual leadings in the past forces us to examine our openness to God's leading in the present. And awareness of former spiritual callings helps us be more receptive and responsive to God's callings in the future. In this event, a spiritual heritage comes alive as an ongoing heritage.

In looking toward the future of the Society of Friends, several queries, or probing questions, should be raised:



How will Friends continue to deal with the issue of what it means to be a Quaker today?

With diversity among Friends growing in some ways, and with Friends in developing nations assuming a larger proportion of the Quaker "family," how will Friends' search for identity proceed? As the process continues, some groups of Friends on the periphery may decide that it is not worth it to continue in association with Friends, while there may emerge a more unified center, seeking to embody what it means to be a Quaker today.



How will Friends in North America and Europe be influenced by the spiritual vitality emerging from growing Friends in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere?

No longer is the primary gulf between Friends the Atlantic Ocean. The spectacular growth of Friends in developing nations means that the majority of Quakers in the

world now live in the tropics or south of the equator. This means that the agenda of World Quakerism (if there can be such a thing) is shifting. No longer are the primary issues dictated by the histories of British or North American Friends.

These issues have, of course, influenced the types of Quakerism emerging in developing nations, but they are now only relevant to the majority of Quakers in the world indirectly. Rather, a new set of issues is calling for attention.

The right sharing of world resources and food-producing technology is becoming more urgent within the world society of Friends. As it was with Christians in the first century, awareness of the physical needs of other members of the fellowship becomes a genuine spiritual concern for the whole Body of Christ. As we seek to meet one another's needs, spiritual revival becomes a reality. And, with the advent of true spiritual revival, human needs are recognized and met by those who are energized and empowered by the love of Christ. It may be that if spiritual fires grow dim in more established groups of Friends, God will use Friends from developing nations to quicken the spirits of other Friends and beyond.



How will Friends recover an appreciation for the "whole" Gospel?

Too often ministry is limited to emotional, physical, intellectual, or social needs. The addressing of any and all of these needs is spiritual, and ministry that is truly spiritual cannot be limited to a single segment of existence. The social gospel versus evangelistic gospel polarization reflects an imbalance. The focus on just one area of need to the exclusion of others brings with it a new set of limitations. Part of the explosive impact of early Christians and early Quakers was their comprehensive approach to spiritual ministry. The vitality of Friends ministry in the future will depend upon the recovery of a spiritual concern to address the whole needs of individuals and societies. The saving power of Jesus Christ brings with it the hope of heaven and the healing of life's hurts.



Will Friends regain a vision for the ministry of every person or will the responsibility for service simply be delegated to a few?

Both pastoral and nonpastoral Friends face the same temptation to leave the tasks of ministry to a visible few. What is encouraging is that many pastoral leaders are regaining a vision of their primary task being to equip other Friends for the effecting of their ministries. Thus, the impact of ministry is multiplied accordingly. Among nonpastoral Friends, some are regaining a vision for preparing for ministry through Bible study, prayer, and

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