

**From “Quakers Anonymous” to the “Birmingham International Peace Center”:  
A Brief History of the Religious Society of Friends  
in Birmingham, Alabama, 1973-2004,  
with Historical Notes on Friends in Alabama, and Reflections from Early Members**

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Until now, there has been no written history of the Friends in Birmingham, Alabama. This brief history is based primarily upon oral history interviews I conducted in March and April of 2004, with two of the earliest members, Paul Franklin and Betty Jenkins, as well as the two longest-serving members who are still attending, Connie LaMonte and Nancy Whitt. Also examined are newsletters, minutes, and state-of-the-meeting reports. The project endeavors to record what is known regarding the formation and evolution of the Birmingham Friends Meeting, as well as information about the personal histories of these Friends.

### **Friends in Alabama**

I have found scattered references to Quakers in Alabama beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, possibly in rural Talladega County (Heacock) and in the historically progressive college town of Marion (Forbes). More recently, there are now Quakers in Huntsville (an aerospace hub near the northeastern corner of the state), in a monthly meeting of SAYMA, the Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association (Lampert); and also in Royall, a rural community in Blount County, about an hour’s drive northeast of Birmingham. The Huntsville Friends sponsor the North Alabama Friends School, which supports home-schooling parents. The Friends in Royall are members of the Common Ground Alternative Community, and meet sporadically as the

Royall Worship Group (Whitt). The early history of Friends in Alabama goes back even further, beginning in 1853.

On December 15, 1853, during a series of anti-slavery meetings with American governors, William Forster (1784-1854; brother-in-law of Elizabeth Fry) of Dorset, England, visited Alabama Governor Henry W. Collier in Montgomery. He was warmly received by Collier, who admitted to owning inherited slaves but took no action with regard to Forster's urgings (Forster 370).

Esther G. and Nathan T. Frame, former Methodists who joined the Friends in 1867 in order to enable Esther to be a minister (Hamm 83), followed Friends Docia and William Wooton to northeastern Alabama, where they had recently purchased a dilapidated antebellum academy, "in Lawrence County eighteen miles from Decater [Decatur, now a bedroom community for Huntsville], and seven miles from Courtland, the nearest station on the Memphis and Charleston Railway" (Frame 298). The Frames arrived in the "Mountain Home" community on August 24, 1884, to hold their first Southern revival meeting on the following Sabbath, at the "Big Spring" (299).

Large gatherings began, and on September 10, an invitation with 120 signatures was written to the Frames from the Hillsboro community, eight miles east of Courtland on the railroad, imploring them "to have you come to us from Mountain Home soon as you can and spend as much time among us as you conveniently can" (301). They did so before their return to Ohio, and left for Alabama again on July 20, 1886, to hold meetings in Cherokee, 40 miles west of Courtland. As before, crowds streamed in to see "the 'Quaker preachers from the North,' and especially the '*Quaker woman*.'" Frame explains that this happened to coincide with a

Congressional campaign in this Democratic area, and that the political climate had an effect upon at least one meeting. “While one of the morning meetings was in session and we were having a blessed occasion a man who was a backslider was revived and filled with the Spirit and made the house resound with his shouts, and in the fullness of his joy declared ‘That he believed the Lord could save a *Republican* as well as a *Democrat*’” (313).

On to Florence, meeting also with an African American gathering who thrilled the couple with their singing (318), and Tuscumbia, the Frames continued traveling, before returning northward. They would return to the South annually for several years, holding revivals in such Alabama communities as Gadsden, Attalla, Springville, Athens, Elkmont, Elkton, and Moulton (all in northern Alabama). Once they traveled to Alabama on October 20, 1890, upon the invitation of a Presbyterian minister, a Brother Tyler, to hold meetings at his church in Birmingham. Nightly they met for at least three weeks, drawing crowds so large that some had to listen at the windows. The *Nashville American* (from almost 200 miles north) featured an article on the revival going on in Birmingham (Frame 431).

The Fairhope [Alabama] Friends Meeting, a Conservative meeting, was formed in 1915 as a Preparative Meeting under the care of Stillwater Monthly Meeting, of the Ohio Yearly Meeting, and was authorized as a Monthly Meeting in 1919. It was founded by migrants from Iowa and Ohio (Short). The experimental community of Fairhope had been founded in 1894 by Iowans who believed in common land ownership. They believed this coastal town had a “fair hope” of success (Chamber).

About half of the members of the Fairhope Monthly Meeting moved in 1950 to Costa Rica (which had dissolved its army in 1948) in response to the draft and the growing militarism

in the United States. They settled upon 3000 acres of mountain forest land, which they and a few other settlers (44 in all) named Monteverde in 1951. In the following year, they obtained a release of membership from Fairhope Monthly Meeting and founded an independent Monteverde Monthly Meeting. Monteverde remains active, and cooperates with the Ohio Yearly Meeting. The Fairhope Friends Meeting, however, was weakened by the emigrants' departure, and requested to be laid down by the Ohio Yearly Meeting in 1967. A few remaining Friends still maintain an independent Fairhope Monthly Meeting, which as of 1992 still had limited contact with Ohio Yearly Meeting (Short).

### **Friends in Birmingham**

The 1890 Frame revival does not appear to have formed a Quaker community in Birmingham. Possibly related to this event, however, a "Quaker Club" for women was organized in Tuscaloosa in 1902, and met at least until 1974 (Club). (For expanded research, I plan to visit The University of Alabama's Special Collections Library to examine the Quaker Club's directories from this time span.) If it did disband in 1974, it appears purely coincidental that this happened about one year after the Birmingham Friends began meeting, less than 60 miles away. In fact, I haven't yet found anyone who has ever heard of the club, and some members of the Birmingham Meeting were living in Tuscaloosa at that time.

A newspaper article from 1977 states that "There has been a Quaker worship group in Birmingham for eight to 10 years, but it was not until 1970 that the group became very active" (Chamblee). However, no other evidence supports any Quaker activity in the city between 1890 and 1973. Around 1973 (the exact date remains in question), soon after Betty and Joe Jenkins

moved to Birmingham (in central Alabama, 262 miles north of Fairhope) from Wichita, Kansas, they were visited by Paul Franklin.

Paul, who grew up in the Methodist church, comes from a family descended from Quakers in the 1750s, who immigrated from Ireland and Scotland to West Chester, Pennsylvania. At the age of 16, he began asking “hard questions” in church. “One day the minister looked at me and said, ‘You know what? You’re a Quaker.’ He gave me a book to read, by Leo Rosten [see **Sources**]...I read the part about Friends and I said, ‘Wow! That’s spot on! That’s just who I am’” (Franklin). Paul then looked in an almanac and found the address for Friends United Meeting, based in Richmond, Indiana. He wrote to them to inquire about Friends near Birmingham. They responded with the address of the Atlanta Friends Meeting, which he began attending each week beginning in 1966, a youth of 16 making the 300-mile round trip in his car. He joined the meeting two or three years later.

After several years of making these weekly treks, Paul again wrote to Friends United Meeting to inquire about any Friends who might be closer to his home. This time, apparently in 1971, the response contained a list of graduates of Quaker colleges, as well as other contacts, in the area. These dozen or so names included those of Betty and Joe Jenkins, with their new address in a townhouse across from Brookwood Hospital in the Birmingham suburbs. The Jenkins’ had already begun attending the local Unitarian church, Paul recalls, and were “reticent” to begin the work-intensive process of forming a Friends meeting.

Around that time, Paul began meeting informally with six or eight persons in the loft of Ensley United Methodist Church. Joe Jenkins’ interest was piqued, and he attended “maybe twice” (Franklin) before the group began meeting in their homes. The group also included

Ralph Galt of Miles College, who was an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). (Miles College is a historically African American school; Galt was white.)

Betty and Joe, who were both from Southern Baptist backgrounds, had briefly attended a pastored meeting, a part of the Evangelical Friends Church Mid-America Yearly Meeting, known as University Friends Church in Wichita. Joe, whom Paul describes as “an organizational person, problem- and solution-oriented,” was 54 when they came to Alabama. Betty, says Paul, is “all sweetness and light, and always positive.” Paul was a young man of draft age, whom Betty describes as “sort of an exploring kind of fellow, and pretty steadfastly interested in spiritual things. We made him welcome, a total stranger. He was interested in a Friends Meeting. He was very persuasive, showing genuine interest.” After the visit with Paul, Joe said to Betty, “Let’s start a meeting” (Jenkins).

This they did, as a Preparatory Meeting under the care of Atlanta Monthly Meeting from 1973 to 1977. The first “official” business meeting (“i.e., at which minutes were recorded”) took place at 5:00 p.m., Sunday, September 16, 1973, at the home of Paul and Kate Franklin at 1208-L South 33<sup>rd</sup> Street in Birmingham (Minutes). Officers were elected for one-year terms as follows: Paul Franklin, clerk; Eric and Linda Neilson, recording secretary; Beverly Thomas, treasurer; and Dot Romine, librarian. The librarian asked about a name to place in the books, and Friends agreed upon “Birmingham Friends Meeting.” Mark Turner also announced that he would seek membership through the Atlanta Friends Meeting. Paul Franklin supplied him with a voucher on behalf of Friends in Birmingham.

“A more permanent place” to meet was also discussed. The University of Alabama at Birmingham administration was hesitant “to rent university facilities to a religious group.”

Friends, as well, were “uneasy over attaching the meeting to any established church,” such as Shades Valley Presbyterian Church, where a room was available. “After silent consideration,” it was agreed to meet at 3:45 p.m., beginning on September 30, in a room to be rented at the YWCA building downtown. A meeting for business was planned for that date, as well as the first Sunday of each month thereafter.

On April 11, 1976, Joe Jenkins announced at the Meeting for Business that he had “been looking into requirements for a group such as ours to become a certified monthly meeting and he listed some of them, noting that our main concern would be lack of plans for a First Day School” (Minutes). The formation of an educational program for children was much discussed in those days; Rick Michaels chaired the Religious Education Committee, which obtained curricular materials from Friends United Meeting.

As of September 12, 1976, ten Friends in Birmingham held official membership. These were Kate Franklin (Brown), Paul Franklin, Noyes Collinson, Betty and Joe Jenkins, and their son Eric Jenkins, members through the Atlanta Meeting; and Steve Meridith and Hugh, Karen, and Rachel LaFollette, of the Nashville Meeting. Fourteen others applied as charter members of the Birmingham Monthly Meeting: India and Ramey Bragg; John, Linda, Regan, and Suzanne Buzzard; Frauke Collinson; Mehta and Nancy Finch; Connie LaMonte; Mark Lindsay; Linda Merz; Rick Michaels; and Nancy Whitt. These 24 included seven persons under the age of 21.

The group admitted that “We are not as grounded [in the Quaker faith] as we would like to be but individuals are reading Quaker material and a study group will be formed this fall to promote a better understanding of the Quaker faith” (Answers). They had also chosen to use the Faith and Practice of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting with regard to membership and

organization. A Committee of Overseers consisted of Noyes Collinson, chair; Betty Jenkins, Linda Buzzard, and Steve Meredith.

The Atlanta Friends sent a Certification Committee to observe the Birmingham Meeting for Business on January 9, 1977. The First Day School officially began on that date as well, led for the following two months by Karen LaFollette. The first budget proposal, made by Linda Merz, Linda Buzzard, and Eric Jenkins, was also submitted and accepted that day. It designated \$65 for 30 copies of the monthly newsletter, \$25 to advertise in *Friends Journal*, \$250 for educational materials (including books, films, and guest speakers), \$100 for social concerns, \$300 for contributions, \$60 for travel and other expenses, and \$1000 for a building fund; for a total of \$1800 “assuming: 15 supports @ \$10.00/month or 30 @ \$5.00/month” (Newsletter).

The February 13, 1977, potluck celebration of monthly meeting certification, held at the home of Frauke and Noyes Collinson, was attended by 16 Friends from Atlanta, as well as some from the meetings in Nashville and Chattanooga (Tennessee), Columbia (South Carolina), and Fairhope. Robert and Patricia Westervelt, potters who had been members of the Atlanta Meeting since 1957 (Ferguson 19), flew in their small airplane from Atlanta, with passengers Sue Williams and Janet Boyte (187). In September 1977, SAYMA accepted Birmingham Friends into membership as a monthly meeting (Newsletter).

From the original three, the Birmingham Meeting had grown to 15-20 regular attenders (the same number who regularly meet currently, though only Connie LaMonte and Nancy Whitt, who refer to themselves as “Quaker twins,” remain from that period). It appears that all those present were given responsibilities. The officers and committee members appointed on March 6, 1977, consisted of 19 persons. Joe Jenkins was the clerk, Nancy Whitt the recorder, and Linda

Merz the treasurer. Committee chairs were Noyes Collinson, Overseers; Nancy Whitt, Social Concerns; Connie LaMonte and Rick Michaels, Religious Education; and Linda Merz, Finance. Linda Merz was the representative to SAYMA, and Betty Jenkins to FCNL.

According to Betty Jenkins, the Friends had met in the living room of the Jenkins' townhouse in the beginning, sitting in an oval formed with dining-room chairs. The room had floor-to-ceiling windows, and was conducive to the process. Betty reflects, "At that time, I was much more sensitive to the inspiration of the silence than I would be today." The meeting for worship would be followed by a potluck lunch in the dining room. The group was close-knit from the beginning. Nancy says that the Jenkins couple were like parents to her.

Informal social gatherings, later to be known as monthly Simple Suppers, began in late 1977, including "a dinner with children at the Collinsons (the excitement of the evening being provided by escaped chickens)" (Newsletter Dec. 1977). These gatherings were officially endorsed at the Meeting for Business on February 3, 1978. As it happened, the same meeting discouraged a suggestion of "the reading of a thought for meditation before worship...[due to the danger of] possibly affecting the freedom of the worship process" (Minutes).

Nancy Whitt, whose sister was already attending the same meeting in Wichita where the Jenkins' had been, "started going in [19]74. I had looked for churches in my denomination; my dad was a Presbyterian minister. I went to a wonderful Presbyterian church in Tuscaloosa that was part of the anti-war movement, part of the civil rights movement; this was in the late 60's, early 70's. Then I came here [to Birmingham] and looked for Presbyterian churches. They were at the time very conservative, very sexist...and I just couldn't find a community, and so I just looked around, and I found a little article...in the paper about Quakers, and they were meeting at

the time at the old Red Mountain School, which later became...Altamont School. So they met in this old, awful building...There were paintings on the wall, graffiti...There were about four or five people there at the time, and I just knew immediately I was home...when I walked into the meeting...I had just always been a Quaker.”

The others present upon Nancy Whitt’s first visit were Betty and Joe Jenkins, Paul Franklin (who would later become “a brilliant teacher of Quaker history”), Noyes Collinson, Nancy Finch, and Mark Turner, who wore “black trousers, a white shirt, and a black Quaker hat” (Whitt). These, along with Connie LaMonte, who first visited the group soon after Nancy Whitt, were “the core group” at that time. Betty Jenkins recalls, “I can remember when Connie walked in the front door in Birmingham. She was a darling, lovely young woman, and she was searching...” Mark eventually relocated, as did Nancy Finch, who remains a friend of Connie’s. For the next period of time, the gatherings consisted of “Betty, Joe, Noyes, Paul, Connie, and [Nancy Whitt], or any permutation of that” (Whitt).

Nancy Whitt recalls receiving a pamphlet, upon her first visit, of John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem, “The Meeting.” This had a great effect upon her. She quotes excerpts, “The world that sound [sic; time] and sense have known falls off and leaves us God alone...These still forms on either side...our purpose magnified [sic; the silence multiplied].’ I mean, it’s very much a corporate worship, and...[the poem] just really made sense to me. It was just sort of thrilling, you know, I mean wow, the whole experience, because...I was just like at home, and the times I have felt absolutely at home on the planet have been during meeting for worship sometimes...”

Noyes Collinson was retired when he relocated to Birmingham in 1973, apparently having lived in New York for some time, followed by civil rights work with the American Friends Service Committee, for whom he had relocated to Atlanta in December 1961, “as director of a merit employment program” (Ferguson 36). Educated at Princeton, Noyes had led Community Chest fund campaigns in California and New England. Although he would later serve as clerk of the meeting, Noyes Collinson encountered some resistance among the Atlanta Friends. He “once was eluded for repeated messages on political and social issues, and as a result refused for a year to speak during meeting” (37).

In the 1960s, Noyes founded “A Fellowship of the Concerned for Prison Visitation” (43). He remained outspoken; amidst a disagreement among the members regarding a day-care proposal, a joint project with the Atlanta and Fulton County governments, Noyes resigned from the meeting’s board of trustees, in opposition to “such heavy government involvement” with the Meeting, which he and others feared could “institutionalize” itself (62). He also, along with his wife Nancy, was active in Atlantans for Peace, which was organized in December 1965 and had around 500 members in 1967 (70). The Collinsons, along with others from the Atlanta Meeting, participated in the massive Washington, D.C., peace protest in November 1969, where they were met with tear gas by the police (94).

Noyes Collinson, who joined the gathering in Birmingham soon after its inception, appears to have had a liberalizing effect during the formative years of the meeting in Alabama, as he also had in Atlanta. Having been begun by Betty and Joe Jenkins, whose experience was in Southern Baptist and Evangelical Friends churches; and Paul Franklin, with no Quaker background yet favoring a Wilburite scriptural theology with silent worship; the Birmingham

Friends Meeting has now grown into a universalist and socially liberal gathering (Whitt). Also interesting are the geographical roots of the members, who have largely been non-Southerners. Paul Franklin, who no longer attends due to theological differences, is a native Alabamian, and one regular attender today is from Alabama as well. The vast majority of attenders and members have always been persons who have migrated to Birmingham from the northern United States; Adrian Smythie, a current active member, is from England.

Nancy Whitt recalls that, in Birmingham, “Noyes and the Jenkins’ were sort of our stable course, because we were all quite young at the time, and they were...the mature people. And Noyes was the one who had had long-term experience with Friends, and I still remember him...pulling out the notes, London advices and queries, during the meeting for worship, and reading one of them, or reciting poetry from memory from Whittier or something...Noyes got us acquainted with SAYMA, and we started going to SAYMA.” The July 1984 *Birmingham Friends Meeting Newsletter*, upon the occasion of Noyes’ 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, cites his contributions to the meeting, of “reading queries; sharing knowledge from his range of experiences; gently but consistently reminding us to keep involved in and informed about social concerns; and always maintaining a healthy sense of humor.”

Along with attending SAYMA, the Birmingham Friends’ worship group was enriched by visits from traveling Friends associated with FGC (Friends General Conference of the Religious Society of Friends) and FCNL (Friends Committee on National Legislation). “That was a big help...,” says Nancy. “Having Quakers come in from outside, we felt we were connected.” Nancy Whitt would later become the first female clerk at SAYMA, in 1977, the same year that the Birmingham Friends became a monthly meeting. She attributes her confidence in the roles

of committee member, clerk, and keynote speaker to her SAYMA mentor, Marion Fuson, who “was always...telling me I could do this,” which was “really empowering, ...really affirming.”

These leadership roles have also been “really challenging” for Nancy, “because with Friends, without a professional clergy, without someone to dump it on, unless you do it, it doesn’t happen. So there’s been a lot of creative reading...I’ve done a lot of studying, of getting together with Friends, of forming Friends groups...” Nancy began a project in the early 1980s, as the editor of an international “newsletter for women in Friends ministry called *The Friendly Nuisance*.” According to the *Birmingham Friends Meeting Newsletter* of July 1984, “Having become friends at the Women’s Center at FGC Gathering last year, these women have formed strong and close connections. These relationships, and the chance to share experiences, insights, and feelings through the newsletter and at FGC bring to individuals a sense of working *together* even while geographically distant.” Allie Walton, then the clerk of Illinois Yearly Meeting, is quoted in this announcement, “There is a root system underground that is spreading...The growing tendrils are reaching out to each other.” The newsletter still exists, although manifest as Nancy Whitt’s e-mail distribution list. Messages about upcoming events, updates on Friends and friends of Friends, poetry, etc., are shared through this electronic network, which is open to all interested persons.

Throughout the early years, the “peripatetic” worship group met in various locations, some for years at a time, and some in weekly rotation. The latter pattern, Nancy reflects, “was probably the worst time, because it’s hard to find the group, and it feels like a group of friends, and you feel like an intruder...” The least conducive location, according to Nancy and Connie, was the American Red Cross building. There was a reading room with a large table in the

middle, dignified portraits of Red Cross presidents on the walls, and constant Muzak playing. They only met there once. They gathered at Connie LaMonte's home for a two-year period; also at Nancy Whitt's apartment; the Catholic Student Center on the campus of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (an "old house" which was later replaced by Saint Stephen the Martyr Catholic Church); Paul Franklin's house; Lodestar Books ("a now defunct feminist bookstore"); the Creative Montessori School in Homewood; the large living room/lounge of the Young Women's Christian Association building; Red Mountain School (later Altamont School; an independent alternative school); a branch of AmSouth Bank, then known as First National Bank ("because one of our members was a vice-president of it"); and at Girls Incorporated ("an organization that's in Crestwood, really nice building, that is geared toward affirming little girls and developing them"; Nancy's daughter attended day care there for a time).

Nancy recalls that they also "rented space with the Mennonites [of Southside Mennonite Church, now known as Grace and Truth] for a while...I think we scared them, because a member [of the Mennonite church thought]...we might have gay marriages, and...we didn't have any gay people in our meeting, but she painted all the worst-case scenarios...from their point of view, and so they were uncomfortable." The Mennonites also decided to return from their new location back to the rental property, "so that didn't last."

In May 2000, Birmingham Friends noted their "exciting achievement" in the preceding year, that of "acquiring a Meeting House following almost 25 peripatetic years of borrowing or renting space from others [as well as at least 23 years of raising the funds for a permanent meeting place]. The house is an older, large white two-story frame house on two lots with wood

floors, lots of light, a large family kitchen, and a meeting room, a library, a childcare room, and extra conference room and an upstairs apartment for a resident Friend...

“We’ve had an open house for our spiritual Friends, those like-minded religious groups in the city. We plan another open house for our immediate neighbors who are racially mixed and have no experience with Friends. Being a group who depended upon space from others, we are grateful to have space to share with other groups, including overnight guests, Alabama Arise [a coalition fighting poverty], Pastors for Peace and even a class of belly dancers” (State of the Meeting).

Times of sadness came during the same year. “We have had significant losses this year of dear Friends, including founding BFM members Betty and Joe Jenkins, whose family moved them to Montana, Sam Berg’s move to the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, and the death of Lew Hendershot, a long-time attender who served as treasurer for many years and who often came early to our rented or borrowed spaces to make them welcoming for later arrivals.”

The character of the meeting had grown rather spiritually diverse by this time. “Our small core of active attenders includes a rich diversity of spiritual traditions and affinities. We have Friends who also worship with Muslims and Friends who worship with Baptists, sit with Buddhists, or who call themselves Jewish Quakers. Some of us are universalist; others are Christ-centered; some participate in Wiccan rituals. Though spiritually diverse, we lack ethnic diversity and most of us are college-educated and middle class economically. We regret this sameness, and hope our working class neighbors, who are mostly African American, will interact with us more once they get to know us” (State of the Meeting).

As the Birmingham Meeting evolved, Paul Franklin grew increasingly frustrated with its tendency toward a universalist theology and missed opportunities for growth. “The hard part became dealing with a non-creedal group of people who had either non-church backgrounds or bad experiences in church,” he explains. He eventually chose to stop attending, embittered and alienated by what he sees as “adherence to tradition and practice, which has led to a dry and dull formality without a belief system. It’s like dried mud that falls apart when you touch it.

“They were always continually on the brink of doing things, but they tossed opportunities to be anything more than they were. It’s unfortunate, because this is after years of sweat and toil in getting the meeting started. During the past couple of years or so, I’ve even tossed around the thought of forming another meeting. They’re just ferociously tolerant and mildly religious. It’s like I’ve watched my child grow up and get on drugs. I still go to the meeting every now and then, and it’s like, ‘I don’t know these people, and I don’t know why they’re here’” (Franklin).

“We’ve been quiet...” Nancy admits. “We haven’t done the social activism that usually gets Quakers known...For a long time, I was just calling us ‘Quakers Anonymous,’ because that’s sort of...what we were...And we still...we never have really, say, joined that [interfaith] peace group in town, or worked with others very well...” It’s a matter of having time, she says, for such involvement; although individual members have swelled the numbers of peace events. Philosophical factors also can play a part. “Friends were unable to unite” at a March 7 meeting for business, when they had been invited to co-sponsor the Birmingham Peace Project’s March 20, 2004, rally on the “Global Day of Protest on the One-Year Anniversary of the Iraq War.” Although individual Friends planned to attend the rally, “concerns included the tone of the rally, including the use of the word ‘demand’; the mixture of demands or the lack of focus on peace;

the lack of nuance in the request for the U.S. to get out of Iraq, including concerns that the U.S. should defer to the U.N. for leadership and should pay reparations for destruction of the infrastructure of Iraq” (Minutes).

Back in 2002, however, in response to “the violence and war taking place in the Mid-East,” the meeting decided, under the strong leadership of Adrian Smythies, to “dedicate an unused room in the Meeting House to serve as the ‘Birmingham International Peace Center.’ The Center has promoted letter writing and the attendance of Friends at peace vigils that occur each Wednesday and Saturday afternoon here in Birmingham. During the Christmas season, we assembled 26 hygiene packets for distribution in Iraq by AFSC. The Peace Center facilitated the distribution of “War is Not the Answer” bumper stickers and yard signs from FCNL” (State of the Meeting 2003).

Friends have also been trained to serve on the G.I. Hotline, which “helps soldiers who are conscientious objectors,” as Whitt explained in her application to the Interfaith Leadership Institute of The National Conference for Community and Justice in 2003. She also points out that “we work against the death penalty and remind Birmingham of the human loss by raising a flag at our Meeting House each time a person is killed by a state in the U.S.;...[and] we are beginning to sponsor the education of a Rwandan orphan girl.” The flag mentioned here is a black banner which reads, “Today we mourn the execution of a fellow human being” (State of the Meeting, May 2001).

Nancy Whitt reflects that “Friends tend to be either sort of almost Jungian...in this inner-looking spiritual growth, personal growth..., or they tend to be...very socially active politically, and one group sometimes doesn’t understand another group...So we’ve tended, I

think, too much toward the indwelling...and so I'm glad to see us getting out into the world a bit more." Early examples of social involvement include a prison ministry, as well as letter-writing campaigns for political prisoners via Amnesty International; the latter activity took place on the third Sunday of each month, or "writing day," beginning in January 1978 (Minutes).

From time to time, the Friends publish a minute as a letter to the editor in a local newspaper. On November 2, 2003, they agreed upon the following public minute:

"Birmingham Friends Meeting is exempted from paying property tax to the City of Birmingham because it is a church.

"Friends want, however, to make use of the money that we would have paid in property tax for the public good. This is a concern not only because at a basic level, the Meeting benefits from city services, but more importantly, the Meeting is a part of the local community. As such, we wish to contribute positively to its welfare.

"We, therefore, will continue the practice that we have adopted in recent years to donate the amount of our exemption to the PTA of our local school, Avondale Elementary. We make this donation deliberately, without earmarking its use so that the money may be used to help meet the greatest needs as identified by the parents and teachers of the school" (Minutes).

This school tax donation is an idea borrowed from Nashville Friends, according to Whitt. At that same meeting, it was reported that the \$90 in change collected in the Quaker Oats box, which has long served as a receptacle for contributions for social concerns, had been donated to Doctors Without Borders.

The meeting sometimes invites speakers for the "Second Hour" following the First Day meetings for worship. These have included representatives from Pax Christi and other

Birmingham-area organizations, as well as a peace activist who had previously been held hostage in Iran while working for CNN, and also Jim Douglas, a member of a Christian Peacemaking Team who served in Iraq in 2003. Friends also speak to other gatherings themselves, including Baptist and Unitarian Universalist churches, senior citizens' groups, and women's groups.

Another important phenomenon has been the Women's Worship Group. Meeting at Nancy Whitt's house weekly for five or six years, and monthly at present, this gathering has "carried us through some bad times," says Nancy. The Unitarian Universalist minister of Birmingham, Karen Matteson, as well as a Jewish woman, have been part of the group. "At first we were all young," Connie and Nancy recall. "We taught each other tarot cards, and read a lot of feminist books...major workshops for women on ritual...on baking bread, with images of kneading...and rising, a lot of chants-- we have our own SAYMA doxology-- we read a lot of books that spoke to us," beginning with *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. "It was dramatic to me when I was introduced to Mary Daly['s writings]," says Connie.

Connie LaMonte and Nancy Whitt have long been "pillars" of the meeting (Jenkins). Soon after accepting the responsibility of publishing the monthly newsletter at the beginning of 1978, after Nancy had done so faithfully for years, Connie reflected eloquently in the February Newsletter upon her experience at the Conference of Friends in the Americas in Wichita, Kansas, the previous summer. There "I heard over and over again Friends use a Quaker phrase which has meant a lot to me, but which in Birmingham we don't use very often. We don't speak of 'holding each other in the Light.' If other Friends are like me, it is probably a matter of shyness more than anything else...[This] for me is an act of faith: Here is my friend whom I

love, and my spirit is reaching out to his spirit. No words [are] spoken or even thought, but we are united in the Sprit, which as James Naylor affirms, ‘delights to do no evil, nor to revenge any wrong, but delights to endure all things, in hope to enjoy its own in the end.’

“Since I began attending Friends meeting, my most effective way of centering down has been to mentally go around the circle of silent Friends and hold each in turn in the Light. Again, the benefits are mine. In searching for and responding to that of God in each Friend, I find that of God within myself. Irritations caused by differences in personalities and opinions subside and I share in our oneness in the spirit” (Newsletter).

### **On Nancy Whitt’s Personal History**

Nancy Whitt, who has been referred to as “the oldest living Birmingham Quaker,” grew up attending Protestant services in United States Air Force chapels with her father, a Presbyterian minister and a “fairly liberal” theologian. No Quakers were present in the services, although members of many denominations were; dogma was not important in this setting.

Her father, having early on been “practically a socialist,” grew more conservative with his service as a military chaplain; he would eventually become a “Reaganite Republican” who complained of “the stupid people who thought you could run the world through pacifism.” Even so, he was a brilliant pastor who remained a model for Nancy of “walking in the Light, answering that of God in everyone.” Even amidst the hierarchical military society, “he could make everyone he met feel special, because he could affirm that in them, and he never would’ve used those words, but he could do it.”

When she began college at The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, she didn't attend a church for a couple of years. "Everyone wore high heels to church, and I couldn't walk in them," she recalls with laughter.

Following the act of African Americans being barred from visiting First Presbyterian Church on "Race Relations Sunday," the Presbyterian Student Center, at the urging of university faculty members, formed its own church. Whitt became a founding member of University Presbyterian Church, where she would serve as secretary for a year while in graduate school. She found this experience meaningful, as she had always been more at home being an active participant in church, rather than an observer in the pew. The church studied the Covenant Life Curriculum ("which the church across town said was Communist"), with a unit on Christian doctrine. Nancy found these discussions, attended mainly by university professors, a bit esoteric. It was like "counting angels on the head of a pin." She also came to dread the ordered worship; however, she did value the sermons, which were theological lectures on peace and poverty, and about connecting faith with action. These lessons, along with her non-dogmatic yet spiritually active background, "really prepared me for being a Friend."

After graduate school, Nancy joined the faculty at Samford University in Birmingham, where she now serves as a literature professor and as the chair of the English department. It was difficult at first to become a part of this Baptist institutional culture; "for years, it was like I couldn't join the club...every talent I had, everything I knew I could do, I wasn't allowed to. Nobody wanted to hear it. Nobody wanted to see it; nobody wanted it, and so it was like I was kept in a box...I'm always an outsider...but...I actually think my leading is to ministry to women, ...and so I think it's very hard to be heard. I think it's very hard to be who you naturally

are.” As she explains in her application to the Interfaith Leadership Institute, “the core calling of my 60 years of life [has been] to ‘change the laws of history’ as the poet, Adrienne Rich says, to lead the world into a recognition of the full Spiritual humanity of women.” This has been a challenge, she notes, in “a school in which women’s spiritual struggles and gifts are trivialized or ignored.”

She quickly found avenues of service with Friends, however. As previously noted, she served as the first female clerk of SAYMA in 1977, only three years after she first visited the Friends. She has also served with the NWP, or Nationwide Women’s Program, of the AFSC, whose goal “is to strengthen the capacity of the AFSC to recognize and act through its programs to eliminate sexism, a root cause of violence. This includes efforts to eliminate racism, homophobia, and class oppression” (Hamilton). Also, upon attending the International Quaker Women's Theology Conference at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, England, she was invited to be a Friend in Residence for one quarter-term, ca. 1986. She acted as a sort of chaplain, while also teaching a course in ethnic American literature. She has been involved as well in a “study/action year of seminary at the Women’s Theological School, then affiliated with Episcopal Divinity School in Boston...in the company of 26 women from ten countries.” Whitt has also served on the FCNL Policy Committee, with which she made political visits to Washington, D.C., four times a year; as well as with MAJIC (Metro Area Justice Interfaith Committee), of Greater Birmingham Ministries.

Nancy had not sought out a church during her first year in Birmingham. She “watched the movies on...[the] Ted Turner network on Sunday morning, and relaxed, and I probably needed that as much as I needed church,...because I was...trying to start up all this teaching [at

Samford University].” Later she noticed the notice in the newspaper about a Birmingham Quaker meeting, decided to visit, and “then I was home; that fit.”

The years to come have been a challenge for the Birmingham Friends, as she explains in her application to the Interfaith Leadership Institute. “My Friends community struggles with the reality that we are all over-educated and (in the local community) we are all white. For the most part we take middle class white privileges for granted. We have chosen to remain in downtown Birmingham; our house is in a mixed neighborhood on 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. South and 43<sup>rd</sup> street. We are theologically liberal, in the Christian tradition but fairly universalist in our beliefs. We don’t really know how to become as involved in our neighborhood as we’d like to be and we don’t know the commitment that would be required.

“My colleagues and students at Samford are even more privileged for the most part, and the students tend to be conservative, sometimes fundamentalist Christians who focus on personal piety rather than social justice. We have not begun as a community to address issues of social class, race at a systemic level, though tax reform has become an issue. On a personal level, we practice assimilation: ‘You’re welcome to the table if you share our manners and like our food.’ We haven’t learned to learn from others. There are notable exceptions and there is a desire among many for change; again, the question is how do we do it?”

Asked about her definition of being a Quaker, Nancy replies, “I think...a Quaker is a person who tries very much to stay in touch with a spiritual element that connects us to...a spiritual Light that’s higher than us, but also that connects us to each other, and also that connects us to the planet...and all other life on the planet, living and non-living...I think it’s sort of a wholeness, and I think it’s very much a person connected with other persons, and persons

connected with humanity, and I think God is that connection. God is that connective spirit...It's the reason that corporate worship is different from...single meditation...and...if you want my theology, read "Song of Myself." That's just it! And [Walt] Whitman's...with his mystical experience...he says that he finds that 'a keelson of the connection [sic; creation] (the keel on a boat that holds it together and guides it) is love.'

"...God is love. That's sort of a fundamental reality of the universe for me...What forms that takes and how you define that, I don't mean warm feeling or anything like that, but I think it's sort of a discipline, caring...and he also says in there..."and I know that all men [born] are [also] my brothers and all women are my sisters and lovers [sic; and the women my sisters and lovers], and then he goes on, even into the little weeds down in the corner there, and also I think there's a connection, I also think we embody...and that the body is not a bad thing...I don't think Quakers are original-sin kind of people, and I do think we're followers of the life and teachings of Jesus. In that sense, I do consider myself a Christian...I grew up with the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount...the life and teachings of Jesus in my bloodstream...I really do think that Jesus in that sense lets us see God...because of just the way he lived, so I think in some ways, whether a Quaker considers him- or herself a Christian or not, I think those principles that are down there that Jesus lived by are sort of core to who Quakers are."

### **Ideas for Further Research**

In preparation for a full-length study on the history of Birmingham Friends, further interviews are planned with Paul Franklin and with Connie LaMonte. Closer examinations of the following questions will be addressed as well: the Quaker Club in Tuscaloosa; the identity

of the Presbyterian church in Birmingham which hosted the Frames' revival; and the history of Friends in Marion, Fairhope, and Huntsville. I plan to explore this study as a potential thesis in my research toward the Master of Arts in American Studies.

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