

Learning Resources 2.1

Conservative Friends (Wilburite)

Conservative Friends are a small grouping, located mainly in the United States, who seek to maintain traditional Quaker peculiarities. This means that they uphold a quietist and contemplative form of unprogrammed worship and spirituality, rather than being programmed, charismatic and emotionally expressive. While they are explicitly Christian, their faith has a universalist dimension, due to the emphasis given to the Living Word, available to everyone. These Friends remain cautious about involvement in the world and are therefore more separatist than activist. They also tend to give greater priority to communalism than individualism.

In seeking to maintain traditional Quaker ways and peculiarities, Conservative Friends distinguish themselves from both Pastoral and Evangelical Friends (who have moved closer to other Protestant Groups in terms of doctrine and worship practice) and Liberal and Pluralist Friends (who have moved away from traditional Christian and Biblical beliefs).

One aspect of the Conservative desire to preserve older Quaker ways has been the use of plain dress and speech, although this is now beginning to wane.

Conservative Friends believe themselves to have preserved the essence of historic Quakerism, understood, at a minimum, to be unprogrammed worship and a Christian identity. However, conservative Friends are by no means uninfluenced by the larger movements among Friends. Perhaps conservative Friends might be best understood as the group least influenced by the other movements – but influenced nonetheless.¹

Conservative Friends are sometimes called 'Wilburite' after the nineteenth-century Quaker minister, John Wilbur (1774-1856).

Today, most Conservative Friends can be found in three yearly meetings in the United States:

Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative)

Ohio Yearly Meeting (Conservative)

North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative)

More Information about Conservative Friends

Websites:

Conservative Quakers of America - <https://www.quaker.us/welcome.html>

Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) - <https://www.iymc.org/>

Ohio Yearly Meeting (Conservative) - <https://ohioyearlymeeting.org/>

North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) - <https://www.ncymc.org/>

Video:

Arthur Berk on Conservative Quakers - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jYEngQaZsM>

¹ Arthur Berk et al. *Traditional Quaker Christianity* (Barnesville, OH: Ohio Yearly Meeting, 2014), 216.

Books:

Arthur Berk et al. *Traditional Quaker Christianity* (Barnesville, OH: Ohio Yearly Meeting, 2014).

Lloyd Lee Wilson. *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* (Burnsville, NC: Celo Valley Books, 1993).

Wilmer Cooper. *Growing Up Plain: The Journey of a Public Friend* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1999).

Online Articles:

Ohio Yearly Meeting Gathering (*Friends Journal*) – John Andrew Gallery and Susan Smith
<https://www.friendsjournal.org/ohio-yearly-meeting-quaker-spring/>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you feel about groups that seek to protect their traditional ways from the influence of the wider society? Do you regard this as a strength or a weakness?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of looking and acting in ways that set a group apart from the wider society?
3. Conservative Friends are uncomfortable with both the influence of evangelicalism and the secular culture of modern liberal society. How do you feel about that?
4. Why do you think that Conservative Friends are so small in number today?



Modern Conservative Friends, with some in plain dress.

Stuart K Masters (2025)

Learning Resources 2.2

Pastoral and Evangelical Friends (Gurneyite)

Pastoral and Evangelical Friends are a large and diverse grouping who tend to be divided into two general tendencies: those who are more modernist in orientation, and those who have been influenced by Holiness Revivalism. They are more likely than other Quakers to have an emotionally expressive spirituality. Having moved closer to an orthodox Protestant position, these Friends tend to be suspicious of universalism. Modernists are more likely to be involved in social activism than Holiness Evangelicals, who have a greater focus on saving souls. Both seek to achieve a balance between the individualist and the communitarian, in which the need for individual conversion and salvation is set alongside the importance of being part of the wider Christian Church. They are called 'Gurneyite' after the Quaker minister Joseph John Gurney (1788-1847).

Pastoral and Evangelical Friends combine traditional Quaker distinctives (e.g. on the sacraments, the significance of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, peace, and oaths) with Protestant Christian emphases. Almost all these Friends appoint pastors and follow a programmed or semi-programmed form of worship in which quiet waiting ('open worship') is just one element. Open worship is understood to be Holy Communion in the manner of Friends.

These Friends are represented by two international umbrella organisations – Friends United Meeting (FUM) and Evangelical Friends Church International (EFCI).

Pastoral and Evangelical Friends have been more committed to mission than the other branches and, since the beginning of the twentieth century, this has produced significant international growth, particularly in East Africa and South America. This missional commitment is described in the Richmond Declaration of Faith of 1887:

The church, if true to her allegiance, cannot forget her part in the command, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15) Knowing that it is the Spirit of God that can alone prepare and qualify the instruments who fulfill this command, the true disciple will be found still sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening that he may learn, and learning that he may obey. He humbly places himself at his Lord's disposal, and when he hears the call, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" is prepared to respond, in childlike reverence and love, "Here am I, send me." (Isa 6:8).

More information about Pastoral and Evangelical Friends

Websites:

The Richmond Declaration of Faith - <https://www.quakerinfo.com/rdf.shtml>

Friends United Meeting (grouping) - <https://www.friendsunitedmeeting.org/>

Evangelical Friends Church International (grouping) - <https://efc-international.org/>

Indiana Yearly Meeting - <https://www.iym.org/>

Northwest Yearly Meeting - <https://nwfriends.org/>

Nairobi Yearly Meeting - <https://friendschurchnym.org/>

Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting - <https://www.scymfriends.org/>

Videos:

Liberal or Orthodox Quaker?

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/are-you-a-liberal-or-orthodox-quaker/>

Quaker pastors

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/what-does-a-quaker-pastor-do/>

What is a Friends Church?

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/what-is-a-friends-church/>

What is the Friends Church?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4t_ozniH2s&t=370s

Books:

Elton D. Trueblood. *The People Called Quakers: The Enduring Influence of a Way of Life and a Way of Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

Jack L. Willcuts. *Why Friends are Friends: Some Quaker Core Convictions Practice* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1984).

Punshon, John. *Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2001).

Paul N. Anderson. *Following Jesus: The Heart of Faith and Practice* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2013).

Online Articles:

Quaker Christianity in Kenya (*Friends Journal*) - Stanley Chagala Ngesa

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/quaker-christianity-in-kenya/>

The Future of Quakerism Belongs to Kenya

<https://explorepartsunknown.com/kenya/the-future-of-quakerism-belongs-to-kenya/>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Given what we know about Quakers in the seventeenth century (see Learning Resources 1.1-1.3), what aspects of the early Quaker vision are reflected in Pastoral and Evangelical Quaker beliefs and practice, and which seem to be at odds with them?
2. Most Pastoral and Evangelical Friends believe that the direct guidance of the Spirit should not be separated from the teachings of the Bible. How do you feel about that?
3. Why do you think this expression of the Quaker faith has been so successful in terms of numerical growth and global reach?
4. These Friends emerged under the influence of the nineteenth-century Evangelical revivals. Do you think they have anything of value to teach other Evangelical Christians?

Stuart Masters (2025)

Learning Resources 2.3

Liberal and Pluralist Friends

Liberal and Pluralist Friends are a relatively small grouping who are divided into two main tendencies: Liberal Christians, and post-Christian and nontheist Pluralists. They both value a more contemplative unprogrammed form of worship, in which charismatic and emotional expression is not encouraged. Both are sympathetic to universalism, but Pluralists regard this as an essential aspect of their Quaker identity. Liberal Friends of all sorts see no need to separate themselves from the world and often work with other like-minded groups on social and political concerns. Liberal Quaker culture tends to be more individualistic than communitarian.

Liberal and Pluralist Friends combine a Quaker commitment to a spirituality of seeking inward guidance and trying to live by this guidance in their lives, with a positive attitude towards the culture of modernity. This is reflected in:

1. A focus on spiritual guidance without the need for this to be closely linked to the Bible.
2. A positive attitude towards modern science and secular approaches to the study of religion.
3. A greater interest in the spiritual journey itself than in reaching any fixed end point.
4. An approach to the spiritual life which values doubt and questioning.
5. An appreciation of other faith traditions as potential sources of wisdom and truth.
6. Socially liberal attitudes to gender and sexuality.

These Friends tend to be permissive when it comes to matters of religious belief, and individual Quakers may find inspiration from a wide range of different sources. Multiple religious belonging is common, producing the phenomenon of hyphenated Quakers (e.g. Anglican-Quakers, Buddhist-Quakers, Pagan-Quakers).

Liberal and Pluralist Friends are to be found mainly within North America, Britain, Ireland, Western Europe, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. They tend to belong to an international umbrella organisation called Friends General Conference (FGC).

More information about Liberal and Pluralist Friends

Websites:

Friends General Conference - <https://www.fgcquaker.org/>

Discovering Quakers - <https://www.discoveringquakers.org.uk/>

Quaker Universalist Voice - <https://universalistfriends.org/>

Quaker Universalist Group (UK) - <https://qug.org.uk/>

Nontheist Quakers - <https://nontheistquakers.org/>

Nontheist Network (UK) - <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/>

Videos:

(Liberal) Quaker Beliefs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUSwpN2-yqw>

Liberal Quakerism: 3 Perspectives

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ueBAGBlfKQ>

Evangelical to Quaker

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/how-i-came-to-quakers-from-evangelical-christianity/>

Books:

Rex Ambler. *The Quaker Way: A Rediscovery* (Alresford: Christian Alternative Books, 2013).

Helen Rowlands. *God, Words and Us: Quakers in Conversation about Religious Difference* (London: Quaker Books, 2017)

Geoffrey Durham. *What Do Quakers Believe? A religion of everyday life* (Alresford: Christian Alternative Books, 2019).

Rhiannon Grant. *Hearing the Light: The core of Quaker theology* (Alresford: Christian Alternative Books, 2021).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Given what we know about Quakers in the seventeenth century (see Learning Resources 1.1-1.3), what aspects of the early Quaker vision are reflected in Liberal and Pluralist Quaker beliefs and practices, and which seem to be at odds with them?
2. Many Liberal and Pluralist Friends believe that the direct guidance of the Spirit is sufficient without the need for any other authorities, including the Bible. How do you feel about that?
3. Given that many people within modern Western societies claim to be 'spiritual but not religious', why do you think that Liberal and Pluralist Quakers remain a relatively small group?
4. These Friends emerged within a modern secular and multi-faith context. Do you think they have anything of value to teach this wider society?



Stuart Masters (2025)