“Flavors” of Quakers in the U.S. Today

It is hard to delineate clear cut branches of American Quakerism because different branches define themselves differently, and because there is much variation and overlap. You can sort Quakers in several ways: by our qualities and characteristics, by the major affiliating organizations we associate with, or by historical lineage (which group is an offshoot of which other group). These different ways of categorizing us will produce similar, but not identical groups. Following is a rough sorting.

Liberal Friends

Generally, liberal Friends practice unprogrammed worship, do not have formal clergy, and emphasize the authority of the Light Within. They value universalism, meaning they include members identifying with a variety of theological traditions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Wicca, and increasingly nontheism. You find them most often in the eastern and western parts of the U.S. and in college towns.

There are two major groups of Liberal Friends:

- Those affiliated with Friends General Conference (see [www.fgcquaker.org](http://www.fgcquaker.org)). These meetings often trace their roots back to the Hicksite side of the major division (see historic notes below) but there are other histories mixed in. FGC includes yearly meetings in the U.S. and Canada.

- Independent or Western Friends. Located mostly in the Western part of the United States, these Friends are sometimes called “Beanites,” because they trace their roots, to some degree, to the leadership of Joel and Hannah Bean, who came out of the Orthodox side of the major division, but parted ways. Independent Friends have no affiliating organization, but they do have a magazine, *Western Friend* ([https://westernfriend.org](https://westernfriend.org)).

Programmed Friends/FUM Affiliated

Sometimes called Gurneyites (after British minister Joseph John Gurney), these are Quakers who have adopted a more formal worship structure, including appointed clergy. They place more emphasis on the authority of the Bible, and are more uniformly Christian. They maintain many Quaker traditions, such as periods of silence during worship, not practicing outward sacraments, and making decisions by unity. Historically, they trace back to the Orthodox side of the major division, and their greatest density is in the Midwest.

This group of Friends is affiliated through Friends United Meeting ([www.fum.org](http://www.fum.org)). FUM has done mission work, especially in Africa, and includes yearly meetings from the U.S., Canada, the Caribbean and eastern Africa.

Conservative Friends

Conservative Friends are often credited with being most like the early Quakers. They practice unprogrammed worship, have no formal clergy, and emphasize the authority of the Inward Light within a strongly Christian framework. Originally two separate breakaway groups that departed at
different times from the Orthodox stream (the first was called Wilburites), they exist now as three separate yearly meetings (Ohio, Iowa, and North Carolina). They have no overarching affiliating organization, although many individual Conservative Friends participate in FGC and some have provided important leadership to that organization.

**Evangelical Friends**

Evangelical Friends broke away from mainstream programmed Quakerism. They are in many ways similar to other evangelical Christian churches, except that they continue to practice traditional Quaker decision making and emphasize their Quaker history. They are more likely to use the term “church” than “meeting,” and “Friend” rather than “Quaker.” Their highest density is in the northwestern part of the country, in particular Oregon.

The affiliating organization for Evangelical Friends is Evangelical Friends Church International ([www.evangelicalfriends.org](http://www.evangelicalfriends.org)). They have done mission work around the world, but especially in Latin America. EFCI has affiliates in 24 countries.

**Backstory from a Philadelphia Perspective**

This is the short, simple version about how we became so diverse.

In 1827, at Arch Street Meeting House, in the context of extremely contentious annual sessions, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting broke into two groups. Each group used a term of derision for the other group (“Hicksite” and Orthodox”), while considering itself the genuine “Quakers.” In time, these terms of derision came to be accepted by each group (just as the terms “Quaker” and “Yankee” were eventually accepted by the groups they were supposed to insult).

To vastly oversimplify the causes of the division, it was primarily a power struggle. Quaker leaders in Philadelphia were trying to exert more authority than was acceptable to much of the body. The main areas in which this authority was challenged can be described as a theological disagreement over which held higher authority: the Light Within or the Bible. A particular point of contention was the effort of the elders to stop local meetings from hosting traveling minister Elias Hicks of New York. They found his message objectionable, and the term “Hicksite” is a reference to him, although he abhorred the division and had no leadership role in it. Many who disagreed with Hicks himself sided with the Hicksites over what they deemed to be a misuse of authority.

After the division at the yearly meeting level, monthly meetings had to determine their allegiance with the Orthodox or the breakaway Hicksites. Many monthly meetings also divided. These divisions could be rancorous, but in many places, especially away from the city, they were comparatively peaceful with cooperative arrangements for property use, etc.

The Hicksites represented about 2/3 of the yearly meeting, but as they were the ones to walk out, they lost claim to most Quaker property. Over time, they had to reproduce the organizational and physical infrastructure. This is why you will often see two monthly meetings only a few blocks from
each other, why there are two Quaker boarding schools in the area, two Quaker colleges (3 if you count Bryn Mawr), etc.

Meanwhile, in the following year, similar divisions involving similar issues took place in a number of other yearly meetings (although nowhere else did the Hicksites again make the strategic mistake of walking out).

In Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Orthodox Friends never took up programmed worship or other innovations that happened elsewhere, and generally they remained most like the Conservative branch of Friends. They never affiliated with Five Years Meeting, the organization that eventually became FUM.

Over time, Hicksite Friends were influenced by another splinter group, the Progressive Friends. This latter group did not rise from a split, but quietly emerged alongside existing institutions. Since Progressive Friends did not have formal membership, individuals did not have to choose one allegiance over another, and some individuals (such as Lucretia Mott) moved back and forth between Progressive and Hicksite Quaker circles. Many other Progressive Friends were former Hicksites who had been dropped from membership for playing too public a role in such issues as the abolition of slavery and women’s rights. (The early Hicksites were not nearly as politically liberal as we like to think of them in retrospect.) By the time the Progressives dwindled away, though, Hicksites had come to resemble much of what they represented.

In 1955, the two separate Philadelphia yearly meetings reunited. This was the result of several decades of small steps toward reconciliation leading to a postwar generation of young adults who were ready to pull down the fences. One of the small steps worth mentioning is the emergence of two “united” monthly meetings affiliated with both yearly meetings: Radnor and Chestnut Hill.

During the same decade, other divided yearly meetings in the U.S. also reunited. As the other Orthodox yearly meetings had affiliated with the proto-FUM, today there are a number of united yearly meetings in the U.S. that have dual affiliations with both FGC and FUM.

**A Note about Quakers Worldwide**

The division into multiple branches took place only in the United States. But because the two programmed U.S. branches have both engaged in mission work, there are programmed Quakers worldwide, the largest numbers being in Kenya. Today you will find unprogrammed Friends in smaller numbers, most often in Europe and in the former colonies of Great Britain (U.S., Canada, South Africa, India, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Australia). But there are numerous exceptions.

For more information about Quakers in the world see Friends World Committee for Consultation:


Americas section (Philadelphia): [fwccamericas.org/](http://fwccamericas.org/)