

# Narrowness and Union

By Gordon McClure

In 1952 Betty Page, my former wife, and I, joined Toronto Meeting (TMM). Betty and I had left the Church of England (C of E) because of its support of just war [*sic*] and its narrowness. I had refused confirmation at age 12 because I did not (and do not) believe the creed. We both left when, before our C of E marriage, we were told that neither Jews nor Gandhi could get into heaven because they knew of but had rejected the C of E. Friends welcomed us as wishing to be followers of Jesus in our actions and they allowed us to grow in our faith as we were ready. At age 23 we were Young Friends (YFs) and got to know others through Camp Neekaunis and Young Friends Committee of North America (YFCNA).

In 1954 I was blessed to be one of five YFs who travelled to Ireland, Germany, London and Yearly Meetings. We represented the range of types of Quaker meetings across North America: Orthodox (Friends United Meeting), Genesee (Friends General Conference), and Evangelical Friends; as well as British and European persuasions. Orthodox meetings such as Toronto were similar to the present United Church and may have been either pastoral or unprogrammed. FGC meetings were unprogrammed, united on witness and accepted the widest range of belief; Evangelical meetings were generally pastoral, programmed and emphasised the bible and personal salvation. YFCNA included the

three types as well as Conservative Yearly Meetings, which were unprogrammed and traditional in speech and dress and faith. Despite differences, Young Friends found no narrowness among them. We disagreed in practice and opinions but not in our common search and friendship.

On our travels we met two old Friends, Bill and Rosemary McMechan, at a German pacifist work camp. We also met Friends who had suffered under both Nazis and Communists and learned that pacifism was possible for some, despite oppression.

Our travel experience led me to be committed towards reunion of the three Canadian yearly meetings. In 1953 they had agreed to work towards reunion. There were two meetings near Niagara Falls, one FGC (Pelham Executive Meeting), and one an Evangelical programmed meeting (Pelham Friends Church). Betty Page was very busy as always with the children at the 1955 yearly meeting but she remembers Elma Starr (a Conservative Friend and Elder) quietly calming down a woman from the Friends Church who was very upset. Despite their objections, the three Yearly Meetings came to substantial unity and decided to unite. I joined a delegation as a YF representative urging the Friends Church to join with us. Other delegates were Mable Willson of Pelham MM (FGC), Fred Haslam of TMM (Orthodox) and CFSC, and Lloyd Williams of Montréal

MM (FGC).

We talked for a long time but could not agree. I remember vividly Mable Willson saying, “Stanley (Van Every) I understand your views but the truth of them has not yet been revealed to me.” I knew from the way she spoke that she was truly open to new revelation, including the possibility that she was mistaken. Despite our meeting, the members of Friends Church decided that they had to remain separate in order to witness to Truth as they understood it. They later joined Ohio Evangelical YM and has since flourished.

I found then (and do now) that liberals do not understand why evangelicals cannot unite with them. Everyone agrees with the statement: “In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty and in all things, charity.”

But we disagree about what is essential and are often uncharitable. I find the wide variety of ministry found in Toronto and Ottawa Meetings sometimes annoying but often inspiring. As a teacher I find that I need others to challenge my views so that I can understand them more clearly and speak of them more acceptably.

As a Young Friend, fifty years ago, and now as an old one, I wish to listen to all types of Friends to witness to the truth as I understand it and yet to find “no narrowness in sects or opinions.” 🍀

*Gordon McClure is a member of Toronto Monthly Meeting.*