

From the Remonstrantse Kerk to the Religious Society of Friends

By Lies Smit

EDITOR'S NOTE: WHILE GOING THROUGH SOME OLD FILES GIVEN TO ME BY THE PREVIOUS EDITOR, I FOUND THIS UNDATED MANUSCRIPT, WHICH I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH YOU. IT HAS BEEN EDITED FOR LENGTH AND CLARITY.

Friends asked me to write about what motivated me to become a Quaker, and to tell about my spiritual journey. First, I thought that I could not do it. It took some more urging before I was able to make an effort and try to share some of my thoughts.

I was born in Holland in 1920. My parents would have preferred to stay in the existing church, but these churches were not ready for a new and open way of looking at things eternal. [So they] belonged to the Remonstrantse Kerk. It was founded in 1619 and their declaration of faith sounds like this:

The fellowship of members of the Remonstrantse Kerk is a fellowship in faith, rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, and who, true to its principle of religious freedom and tolerance, wants to honour and serve God.

The Remonstranten believed that God speaks to every human being, and that his love is embodied in Jesus Christ. They believed in the universal love of God and did not hold that some are chosen and some are not. They wanted to read and study the Bible and thus understand it more fully, and they wanted to keep an open mind. Being free them-

selves, they wanted to honour and acknowledge other Christians and other faiths.

I went to Sunday School, which was much like our First Day School. It amazes me how much comes back to me. These days when I come home from grocery shopping, I cross a little footbridge and by that time I am pretty tired. Then I start singing all the hymns I learned in Sunday School, and which I thought I had forgotten. One after the other, they come to life.

When we were older, we had confirmation classes and our minister allowed and taught us to ask questions and think for ourselves. He introduced us to different religions, and invited their members to come and speak to us. Also, we visited different churches and a synagogue. It is a blessing that we were not restricted to an orthodox way of thinking and many of the values that I held dear are still dear to me.

One evening, he invited a Quaker to come and speak to us, and that was how I was introduced to Quakerism. Her name was Maria Van Everdingen and later we became friends. We talked about the manner in which Friends worship and also about how, during the Spanish War, Friends helped both sides with humanitarian aid. I had some questions about whether Friends were able to help Jewish people in Germany. After our talk about Friends and Friends' ways, she told me that there was quite an

active group of Young Friends in Amsterdam, and suggested that I go and find out more about Friends. That I did.

Young Friends (teenagers to thirty years) met once a month on Saturdays, went to meeting on Sunday morning, and in the afternoon there was a discussion group in the home of one of the Friends. This way, Young Friends and older Friends got to know each other well.

Then war broke out and during the Occupation I was not able to go to meeting. Correspondence was also difficult because of the censorship, and towards the end there was no mail at all. After the war, I got diphtheria and became paralysed for half a year, and then slowly regained the use of my legs. My parents looked after me and, as a bonus, I met Dick, my husband-to-be. His brother was a friend of my brother. Dick was a marine engineer, waiting for an assignment on a ship to Indonesia and the Far East.

[Around that time] Friends sent me one of the parcels that had come to the Quaker Centre in Amsterdam. They felt that I should have one. It came from three students in the United States, and it contained what was so badly needed: toothpaste, a toothbrush, needles, thread, peanut butter, and maple sugar. The people who decided on the contents certainly knew what they were doing.

One of the students was Margaret

Watson, a Canadian exchange student who later joined the Society of Friends. We kept corresponding, telling each other when we were getting married and, later, about the births of our children.

After Dick and I were married (by proxy), I sailed to Indonesia and met Dick in Djakarta to continue on to Surabaya. Later on, we moved to the country. While we were in Indonesia, we considered emigrating to either the United States or Canada. Margaret encouraged us to come to Canada, saying that engineers were needed, and that we would be welcome to stay with her until we found a place of our own. We decided to take her up on her offer. And there we were in 1953, being welcomed by Margaret and Alex Watson and their family!

The very first Sunday, we went to meeting. Margaret had not been to a Friends' meeting before and informed me that I had to wear a hat. I said, "But I don't have a hat." However, she insisted, and I took my winter hat. Margaret Smith met us at the door and said, "You will find Friends much the same [the] world over." So, no hat.

I remember very clearly the first time we went to meeting for worship in Toronto. I strongly felt that this was the way I wanted to worship and the way I wanted to live. Friends' belief in simplicity appealed to me. I still feel strengthened and encouraged to live the way Christ teaches us.

However, I am a doubting Thomas, taking heart in the saying of an old monk who said, "Doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow." One experience, though, will stay with me

forever. One night years ago, I could not sleep. I was worried and desperate. I asked God to please hold my hand, and instantly there was peace.

We started to attend meeting for worship regularly. It took us a long time to get to know Friends. Everybody was so busy and there did not seem to be time to reach out. Also, culture shock and our shyness did not help. Only after we went to Camp NeeKauNis did we feel part of Toronto Monthly Meeting.

After careful consideration and struggling with the Peace Testimony, I applied for membership.

John and Nancy Pocock met with [me] and I was welcomed into membership.

I served on many committees, be it Monthly Meeting or Yearly Meeting. Dick and I served on the NeeKauNis Committee. It is encouraging to see NeeKauNis blossom, and to watch the younger generation take over.

We took part in Canadian Friends Service Committee. During the Vietnam War, one of our tasks was to see that medical supplies reached all sides of the conflict. The supplies for South Vietnam could be mailed in the main post office via the Red Cross, but for North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, we needed to find another route. The ship, *Alexander Pushkin*, was willing to take the medical supplies to Moscow, and the Russian Red Cross saw to it that they reached their destination. Kathleen Hertzberg,

David Newlands and I travelled to Montreal, where the *Alexander Pushkin* was moored in the harbour. After delivering the supplies, we were invited to take part in a genuine Russian lunch.

We also attended lectures given by Friends at the Royal Ontario Museum, one of the few times Friends reached out to the community. I attended a study group at Pearl and Leroy Jones's home, and appreciated the encouragement of Leroy, whom I could always ask for advice.

One of the concerns I worked on was the need for a senior citizens' residence with different levels of care. For years, we planned, and [eventually] it seemed the right time, with government support available, and many Friends in favour. But there was no unity, and the project did not get off the ground. I still feel sad about it. Despite this disappointment, I feel that being a member of Toronto Monthly Meeting has been a privilege indeed, and a growing experience. Friends share on a deep level and I am often moved by the fact that after a meeting we arrive at a better decision than we would have arrived at on our own, especially after controversial issues. We have many Friends who are shining examples and who show us the way.

In difficult times, we support each other. I still feel that compassion is the strength and soul of religion. I am grateful for the support of the Meeting and individual Friends. I pray that younger Friends will support each other in the way I have been supported. Being a Friend is a rich and rewarding experience. ☞

Lies Smit was a member of Toronto Monthly Meeting, who died in 2004.