

Quakers show value of looking hard at history

They reexamined their role in slavery and abolition.

By William C. Kashatus

Apologizing for slavery has resurfaced as a controversy in the national dialogue on race. Last summer, Congress passed non-binding resolutions doing so. More recently, the Episcopal Church issued a formal apology.

Some argue that such apologies are a mistake, misreading history and distracting from the real work of race relations. Others insist they're a necessary first step to coming to terms with an issue that still haunts the nation's soul.

Philadelphia's Quakers seem to have reached a compromise. Instead of issuing a formal apology, the Society of Friends is taking a hard look at its historical role in slavery and abolition. In the process, it's discovered some unpleasant truths and published a revisionist history correcting previous accounts

that glorified Quaker abolitionism.

To be sure, Philadelphia's Quakers were pioneers in the struggle to abolish slavery. In 1688, the Germantown Meeting wrote the first antislavery petition in North America. Acting on the denomination's most fundamental belief — in an "Inner Light," or presence of God, in every human being — the Germantown Friends reasoned that if God manifests in each individual, then all humans are of equal value in his eyes. Accordingly, they urged their Quaker brethren to "stand against the practice of bringing slaves into this colony, or selling them against their own will."

But the leaders of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting ignored the petition. Many Quaker elders were the richest and most powerful merchants in Pennsylvania, and their wealth came from dealing in the African slave trade. Some even owned slaves themselves. This contradicted the Quakers' belief in equality, but they refused to admit it.

So the struggle to end slavery within the Religious Society of Friends rested with the more independent-minded and compassionate Quakers. Not until 1758 did the yearly meeting forbid members from involvement in the slave trade. Eighteen years later, in 1776, slaveholding was made a cause for disownment from the faith, making the Friends the first sizable Christian denomination to abolish slavery among its members.

Though late-19th-century histories suggest Philadelphia Yearly Meeting unconditionally supported the antislavery movement, most Quakers were not involved in it. Instead, individual Friends focused on the broader society and appealed to the consciences of slave owners. Some worked with non-Quakers and free blacks despite the yearly meeting's warnings to "avoid activities with those not of our religious profession."

Those Quakers who embraced abolitionism adopted a range of approaches, including colonization, or relocating freed slaves to Liberia; antislavery pamphlets; petitions to Congress; and boycotts of products made with slave labor. Only a radical minority of Quakers participated in the Underground Railroad, the clandestine network of abolitionists who illegally guided slaves to freedom in the North.

In fact, divisions over theology, social reform, and politics led to a schism between Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and its radical abolitionist members, who established a yearly meeting of Progressive Friends near Kennett in 1853. These radicals saw themselves as operating according to a "higher law" that superseded federal law, consistent with Christian principles set forth in the Bible.

Several members of this splinter group were active Underground Railroad agents,

including Thomas Garrett of Wilmington, Elijah Pennypacker of Phoenixville, and Lucretia Mott of Philadelphia. They admitted that their efforts would not have succeeded without the assistance of William Still, the African American director of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society's General Vigilance Committee, and Philadelphia's free black community.

On June 20, 1862, a delegation of Progressive Friends met with President Abraham Lincoln and implored him to free the slaves. In so doing, they said, he would not only secure a favorable place in history, but also "secure the blessing of God." Delegations-like these, along with changing political circumstances and Lincoln's own spiritual transformation, helped inspire him to issue the Emancipation Proclamation less than six months later.

After revisiting its past, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting cannot rightfully take credit for the heroic efforts of individual Quakers who jeopardized their livelihoods — and, in some cases, their lives — to end slavery. Many of these abolitionists were in fact alienated or disowned by the meeting leadership. To admit that historical fact is a necessary first step in thoughtful discussion and constructive action on race.

This was the goal of Donna McDaniel and Vanessa Julye, whose recent work, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African Americans, and the Myth of Racial Justice*, offers a refreshingly candid revision of the history of Quaker abolitionism. Let's hope the book serves as a starting point for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and a model for other denominations as this country moves forward on race relations.

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