

A Short History of St. Louis Friends

Friends came later to Missouri than to other Midwestern states, because ours was a slave state, and fiercely divided both during and after the Civil War. The first gatherings for worship in St. Louis occurred in 1932, among Friends from Pennsylvania and Massachusetts who had moved here to teach. They met in homes until the group grew large enough to request space in the Southside YMCA on Grand Avenue. With help from Quaker leaders elsewhere, they organized as a monthly meeting in 1939, and took the name St. Louis Society of Friends.

From the beginning, there were outreach attempts through newspaper stories and ads, and in 1939 there was a public meeting with a talk by Clarence Pickett, then head of American Friends Service Committee; this brought Quakers and their works to the attention of the community. There already were after-worship study sessions, focused on Friends history, organizations, and pacifism. As Europe plunged into war, there was increasing attention to relief of the victims (St. Louis Friends shipped over two tons of cleaned, mended clothing to AFSC for European relief), and to counseling and support of conscientious objectors.

In 1941, St. Louis Society of Friends was accepted into affiliation with Friends Fellowship Council, changing their name to St. Louis Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, with 13 adult members and two children. The Wood family, Friends from Pennsylvania, had arrived just days before and were not yet members of the Meeting. Under urging of the Fellowship Council, Ed Wood and his sister Lucretia attended Illinois Yearly Meeting in 1943, traveling two days by bus and then driving the last ten miles with a Quaker family. On return, they recommended that St. Louis join this Yearly Meeting; application was made, and the Meeting was accepted into membership through Blue River Quarterly Meeting in February 1946, thus becoming members of the Quarterly, the Yearly, and Friends General Conference. St. Louis Friends had not been shy about asking for visits from nationally known Quakers, but these memberships increased the amount of training in spiritual development and leadership. They further promoted leadership development by starting with a three person clerkship, and later

rotating clerkships in order to give all members experience in that area.

Soon a First Day School was started, and a newsletter began to be published, which has continued without interruption. The Meeting continued to grow, and by 1957, with 27 members and attenders, and 10 children, they bought their first meetinghouse, in Rock Hill. It cost \$16,000, a large sum in those days, but with hard work and considerable help from outside Friends, the amount was raised. Meeting members and attenders remodeled the building for worship in the round, converting what had been the chancel to a library, and posting a hand-lettered version of the peace testimony in a glass case in front of the building.

Over the years, local Friends followed leadings to work with native Americans, to oppose nuclear arms (two Friends were instrumental in the baby teeth project, which helped mobilize support for the 1963 treaty banning atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons), to oppose the Vietnam War and provide counseling and support to conscientious objectors, to send medical supplies to Vietnam, to support a racial justice ministry in Cairo, Illinois, to assist refugees from southwest Asia, to assist ex-prisoners in establishing life in the community, and many other causes.

St. Louis Meeting accepted a Friends worship group in Carbondale, Illinois, as a preparative meeting, and later helped Friends in Columbia and in Rolla, Missouri (the latter still a preparative meeting under our care). For a few years, members formed allowed meetings in St. Louis City and in Lebanon, Illinois.

Some leadings were either not endorsed by the Meeting (e.g., a request to make the meetinghouse a sanctuary for undocumented Latin American refugees), or were labored with over years (e.g., a request for equal participation of sexual minorities in the life of the Meeting, including marriage). At times like these, Friends re-asserted that unity does not always require unanimity, and we have endorsed patience, recognizing that in time, “way will open” for a true leading. The first same-gender marriage under our care was witnessed with joy at the beginning of this century.

Another struggle occurred in the 1990's as our Meeting grew, and the city of Rock Hill imposed closer restrictions on our use of the two buildings we owned. We considered expanding the buildings, erecting a new building elsewhere, or finding an existing building to meet our needs, consistent with our concerns for simplicity, stewardship and community. When our present building, a century-plus old church in St. Louis City was found, we struggled with the price, and then took a leap. Naturally, we found we had leaped into unforeseen problems, including remodeling to meet City code, tuckpointing, and acoustics, in addition to the purchase price. But once we passed the code requirements, we moved in in March 1998. In September 2013, we paid off the mortgage.

The hopes of many, that in moving into the City we would find new occasion to be of service, are beginning to be fulfilled; for the past two years we have joined a group of organizations providing overnight shelter for the homeless, on wintry nights when other shelters overflow. We have benefited from getting to know both our homeless neighbors and the volunteers from other churches and colleges who have helped.

(to be continued)

Note: This brief overview is condensed from a fuller history compiled by Trudy Wood. We plan to post that history on the Meeting's website, newsite.stlouisfriends.org, as much interesting detail was necessarily omitted here.