

Historical Background and Rationale for an Illinois Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice

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When Illinois Yearly Meeting held its opening business session in 1875, the very first item on the agenda was the issue of what “discipline” the new yearly meeting would use to guide its operations. The larger of the two quarterly meetings constituting ILYM had previously been part of Indiana Yearly Meeting (now known as Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting), and the decision was made to adopt the Indiana Yearly Meeting Discipline, “with the understanding that Monthly and Quarterly Meetings were to bring forward next year such amendments as they deem proper.”

No amendments were proposed until two years later. At the yearly meeting sessions in 1877, Blue River Quarterly Meeting proposed two small changes, and in the discussion that ensued, it became clear that Friends desired a more thoroughgoing revision. A committee was appointed to undertake this task, and it returned a year later with a substantially new document, which was adopted as the *Rules of Discipline and Advices of Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends*.

The *Rules of Discipline and Advices* served ILYM for almost fifty years, though occasional minor revisions were made throughout this period. A reprint was issued in 1892, incorporating revisions made to that point; subsequent changes were printed on loose slips of paper to be inserted into the existing book. But by the second decade of the twentieth century, the discipline was starting to seem rather old-fashioned even with these changes. A committee was appointed to revise it in 1917 — but suspended its work in 1922, when Friends General Conference began a project to produce a uniform discipline for all seven of its yearly meetings. Officially titled *The Book of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends*, this book was completed a few years later, and adopted by ILYM in 1927.

The idea of a uniform discipline for all of Friends General Conference was short-lived. In the 1940s and 1950s, many of the yearly meetings which had been divided in the Hicksite-Orthodox schism of the 1820s were reunifying, and faced the challenge of developing a discipline — or *Faith and Practice*, as such books were increasingly titled — that would be acceptable to both sides. Bridging these internal divides took precedence over maintaining uniformity across yearly meetings, and several FGC yearly meetings produced their own separate books.

Illinois Yearly Meeting had not been divided, but by the time the 1927 discipline went out of print, it too seemed dated, and the idea of a revision was brought forward. Some Friends were skeptical that ILYM could produce a book that would compare favorably to the new *Faith and Practice* produced by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1955; others noted that many of the procedures outlined there did not match existing ILYM practice, and suggested that the process of composing its own *Faith and Practice* would be spiritually beneficial to the yearly meeting. After much discussion, Illinois Yearly Meeting adopted the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* in 1956 as a temporary measure. A paste-in sheet listing differences in practice between Illinois Yearly Meeting and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was made available to be affixed to the inside front cover of the book, and the ILYM Ministry and Counsel Committee was asked to appoint a “work team” to produce a draft of a new discipline specifically for Illinois Yearly Meeting.

The “temporary measure” of adopting the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* turned out to last nearly 65 years. Ministry and Counsel Committee reports for the years following 1956 make no mention of the “work team” that was to be created, and no draft appears to have

been produced. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting issued lightly revised versions of its *Faith and Practice* in 1961 and 1965, and then a major revision in 1972; but Illinois Yearly Meeting continued officially to use the 1955 version with the paste-in sheet. Nonetheless, many local meetings within ILYM began using the 1972 edition, or looked to *Faith and Practice* books issued by other yearly meetings for guidance.

By the early 1990s, official reliance on the 1955 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* was recognized no longer to be practical. The idea of composing a new *Faith and Practice* specifically for Illinois Yearly Meeting was raised again, and in 1991, the yearly meeting appointed an ad hoc committee to explore this possibility. In the meantime, the 1972 edition of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* was adopted as a "working document." Philadelphia Yearly Meeting issued revised editions in 1997 and 2002, which Illinois Yearly Meeting again adopted as stopgap measures.

The ad hoc committee recommended in 1992 that the yearly meeting proceed with the project of producing its own *Faith and Practice*. The yearly meeting concurred, and a committee was appointed to begin drafting text, with the goal of completing the project in five years.

The five-year timeline proved to be overambitious. No text was submitted to the yearly meeting until 2003, and then only two short sections. Since Illinois Yearly Meeting had gone so long without its own *Faith and Practice*, and was accustomed to relying only loosely on Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's book, some Friends were skeptical of the value of the project, and hesitant to commit to any specific text. At the request of the yearly meeting clerk, the Faith and Practice Committee produced a document reviewing the rationale for an Illinois Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, reproduced in part here:

Given the value that we place on participation, integrity demands that we participate in the shaping of our own practices and in the expression of our faith rather than yielding to Friends in another yearly meeting the responsibility for decisions which a book of Faith and Practice reflects, a yearly meeting in which we have no part and whose members were not thinking of our situation in their deliberations. The spiritual work of coming into unity on an articulation of our own faith, structure, general procedures, and identity is of intrinsic value; however similar the result of our own discernment process to that of other yearly meetings, we are mindful of the ancient Quaker challenge, "What canst thou say?"

Apart from the demands of integrity and authenticity, our meetings are widely scattered and many are small, making structure designed in a region where Quakers are "thicker on the ground" less relevant here. Thus books of Faith and Practice written for more geographically compact and demographically larger yearly meetings tend not to fit our situation very well.

A further consideration is that yearly meetings' books of Faith and Practice are periodically revised. As we have found, adopting another yearly meeting's book of Faith and Practice leaves us subject to their revision schedule. It is not just that the books are revised on schedules not of our choosing; changes in content may be made which we might not have been led to make. Conversely, changes may not have been made that we might be led to have made, had we been writing our own revision. Indeed, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* has changed since 1955 as a result of changes within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and, more importantly, through careful spiritual labor that we have not participated in or done on our own. The other possibility might occur as well, namely, that Illinois Yearly Meeting may work through an issue with deep spiritual labor that has not yet been done by another yearly meeting.

The spiritual growth of a yearly meeting as a religious community often requires the prayerful labor to come into unity in God, not the avoidance of such labor. In this respect, the effort to find an expression of faith and practice with which the whole yearly meeting can unite is an important and ongoing process. A book of Faith and Practice is not so much the conclusion of such a process, but a milestone along the way.

From 2003, the process of developing this *Faith and Practice* progressed more quickly and steadily. Each section was composed initially by the Faith and Practice Committee, and revised — usually multiple times — before being distributed to the wider yearly meeting community for feedback. Almost all sections were presented and discussed in workshops, during yearly meeting gatherings and/or at local meetings and worship groups. After being revised in response to feedback received, each section was submitted separately to a yearly meeting business session, at which time it was read aloud before the body. In some cases, additional changes were requested. Each section was approved by the yearly meeting for a provisional period ranging from one to five years. Additional feedback was received and additional revisions made during these provisional periods; each section was then approved for an indefinite period as its provisional period expired.

This *Faith and Practice* represents the completion of a nearly 30-year project. During this time, 26 different Friends served on the Faith and Practice Committee, none for the entire period. We hope it will serve the yearly meeting well.