

Quakers in Norway

By Hans Eirik Aarek

Early Quaker History in Norway

The history of the Norwegian Society of Friends starts in 1814, as released prisoners from prison ships in England returned home and started silent meetings for worship in Stavanger and Christiania (the name of Oslo at that time). But there is a Quaker history in Norway going back for quite some time, and we shall tell that history first.

In the 17th century large quantities of timber were exported from Norway to England on both British and Norwegian ships. In a letter from George Fox in 1659, Norway is mentioned as a country to which Friends should send Quaker literature. Quakers are believed to have visited Norway before 1660, possibly already in 1657-58. There is reference to a visit by Thomas Shaw to Norway in 1659 on his way to Scotland and London. This is only a few years after 1652, the year which is recognised as the start of the Quaker movement.

The next reference to Norway in Quaker sources is in a report concerning a ship, deporting Quakers from Britain to British colonies, which lost its course during a storm in 1666, and came to Bergen where it remained for 20 days. One of the Quakers on board, Laurence Fullove, reports that tracts were handed out to curious citizens of Bergen. That same year, in 1666, the first Quaker tract in Danish/Norwegian was published in the Netherlands, John Higgin's *The Lord's Message to All Persons who confess their faith in God ...*

In 1674 the Quaker missionary and shipmaster, William Bayly, visited Porsgrunn. That same year George Fox mentions in a letter that two Quakers from Norway visited London, and the Epistle from Yearly Meeting of 1683 mentions that friends from Norway were present at Yearly Meeting.

The first Norwegian to be mentioned by name in connections with Quakers is Gert Søfrensen who is accused in Tønsberg in 1687 of spreading Quaker tracts translated from English.

But the best known person in Quaker history before 1814 was Christoffer Meidel (1659 - about 1710). Meidel was born in Porsgrunn and studied theology in Copenhagen. In 1687 he was ordained as the first minister of the Danish-Norwegian church in London. He later became a Quaker and in 1702 set out on a mission during which he also came to Norway. Meidel was also trying to recruit Norwegian immigrants to the Quaker colony in Pennsylvania. He was arrested and in the spring of 1703 expelled from the country. He remained interested in Norway, and he sent Quaker publications to Norway both in 1704 and 1706, but the books and tracts were confiscated.

The most important contribution of Christoffer Meidel was his translation work, which had effect far beyond his lifetime. In 1705 he translated Penn's *A Small Key*, in 1706 Dell's *Teachings about Baptism*, and in 1717 and 1738, after Meidel's death, Barclay's *Catechism* and *Apology* respectively were published in London in Danish/Norwegian translation. These books turn up in Norway-Denmark in various connections.

As early as 1739 Barclay's *Apology* is found in Norway. The books are regularly prohibited and confiscated, but that does not prevent them from appearing in the libraries of clergy and other members of the upper classes. Presumably they would do no harm there! In the one year of freedom of the press, 1771, Eric Meyer from Bragenes published a new edition of Dell's *Teachings about Baptism* with an addendum about the altar sacraments. Later in the 18th century there are scattered episodes in Norway which may be due to Quaker influence, but the political and religious circumstances made it very difficult to spread literature and even more difficult to establish a religious society. It is still true to say that some of the basis for a Norwegian Quaker Society was laid during this period.

The Society of Friends in Norway

As mentioned above, the history of the Society of Friends in Norway started in 1814. At the end of the Napoleonic wars (1807 - 1814), Norwegian prisoners of war returned to Norway and started practising their Quaker faith in their home country. They had brought home one copy each of Barclay's *Apology* as a gift from English Friends.

Initially they did not organise as a society. The participants were returned prisoners and other interested individuals.

The first conflict with authorities came already in 1816. Then Knut Halvorsen Revem married Anne Olsdatter in Christiania in the manner of Friends, and the authorities refused to acknowledge the marriage. That same year Parliament appointed a commission to look into the Quaker problem. Quakers put the new, liberal Norwegian constitution of 1814 to its first test. There had been a clause in the draft constitution to permit religious freedom, but somehow it did not make it into the final version.

During August and September of 1818 British William Allen and French-American Stephen Grellet visited Norway. They felt that the small Quaker group ought to organise properly, and set up a structure according to the English-American Quaker custom, with Meetings for Business, Minutes of decisions, and lists of members.

The newly formed Society of Friends was meant to take care of the necessary ecclesiastical functions and exist as a separate religious entity outside of the state church. Lists of members were to be forwarded to the authorities annually. A booklet of regulations and also of Advices and Queries was published. It was meant for both internal use and for the benefit of Norwegian authorities.

The Society of Friends was not acknowledged by the authorities, but a few ad hoc solutions to pressing problems were found. In 1819 Knut and Anne Halvorsen had their marriage recognised and were allowed to reside in Norway. Other named Quakers were allowed to live in the Stavanger area by Royal Decrees of 1826 and 1828 on condition that they reported births, deaths and marriages to the authorities and did not proselytise.

In the meantime Elias Tastad in Stavanger had been prosecuted for burying his twins and the old prisoner of war, Ole Frank, in un-consecrated soil. In Christiania Knut Halvorsen was punished for burying one child and one adult in un-consecrated soil.

Some Quaker sympathisers and Haugians had emigrated and gone to America under the leadership of Lars Larsen Geilane on the *Restauration* in 1825. This was the start of a major exodus which was to carry about one million Norwegians across the Atlantic. The 1825 emigration has given Norwegian Quakers a very special place in Norwegian history. Religious dissenters experienced very difficult conditions due to legal persecution by the authorities, who confiscated property and sentenced them to fines and imprisonment. These very difficult conditions represented significant push factors in respect of emigration throughout the 19th century.

About one third of the members of the Norwegian Quaker Society emigrated. Opinions among Friends were divided. There were those who contended, with the support of English Friends, that the right thing would be to remain in Norway and fight for religious freedom.

The Norwegian Society of Friends was a very small society. Originally 16 prisoners of war returned to Norway as Quakers. Some of them played a crucial role in the formation of the Norwegian Society of Friends, others disappeared. At the founding in 1818, eight persons, four men and four women, became members in Stavanger, and four, three men and one woman, in Christiania. When the *Restauration* sailed for America in 1825, nine members remained in Stavanger.

The group in Christiania withered away with time, and Stavanger becomes the main seat for Quakerism in Norway. Despite the Decree that Quakers were only allowed to reside in the Stavanger area, Quakerism spread to Ryfylke, and later - especially after the *Act Relating to Dissenters* of 1845 - to Bergen, Tromsø, Røldal, Voss, and Kvinesdal, with scattered Friends even in a few other places. Meetinghouses were built in Kvinesdal, Sauda, Røldal, Skjold/Tysvær, and Tromsø, and graveyards were established in Skjold/Tysvær, Sauda and Stavanger.

In 1846 the Society of Friends becomes the first officially registered and legal religious society outside the state church in Norway. In 1956 Methodists and the Lammers Society were registered, and others follow. Quakers were the main movers for an act on dissenters, and this is the second issue which has written Norwegian Quakers into Norwegian history.

The Norwegian state church is not an open national church in the same way as its Danish and Swedish counterparts, and it has never been possible to be a member of the Church of Norway and also a full member of a dissenting church.

The number of Quakers was small up to the beginning of the 1840-ies. Then there is growth - even before the act on dissenters - and this growth continues up to the end of the 1860-ies. This growth takes place despite emigration and the emergence of other alternative religious societies. Membership

peaks in 1868 with 175 registered members. However, there were more people who considered themselves Quakers. In the 1865 census, 473 persons state that they are Quakers; in 1875 the number is 403.

The Act Relating to Dissenters did not solve all problems. Conscientious objection to military service was still not recognised, and Quakers still had to pay "clerical claims" and school tax, even though they were a separate church and organised their own schools. Legal distraint, fines, and imprisonment caused problems for Quakers right up to the end of the century.

The years 1850 to 1870 were still good years for the Norwegian Quaker Society. A number of British and American Quaker missionaries visit Norway and carry out an extensive programme of meetings. Quaker publications are published and distributed, and there are Quaker schools both in Stavanger and in rural areas. Much of this activity is financed by British Friends, and the Norwegian Quaker Society reports its activities to the Continental Committee of London Yearly Meeting. It is probably true to say that Norwegian Friends were dependent on its British "mother society" throughout the 19th century.

The last decades of the 19th century appears to be a period of stagnation and decline. It is as if the Society lacks the ability to renew itself as a religious society, and that much of the creativity and activities of central members are channelled in other directions; directions which were in keeping with basic Quaker social and ethical testimonies, but which based their organisation outside the Society of Friends. This is the case with the temperance movement, which by and large was a Quaker initiative led by Asbjørn Kloster, and which later resulted in cooperation with other dissenters such as Baptists and Methodists across confessions.

Quakers, who had worked for the right to refuse to military service since the 1840-ies, became central in laying the foundations of a Norwegian peace movement in the 1890-ies. In addition Quaker leaders such as Endre Dahl, Torstein Bryne, Anna Andersen (sen.), Peter Fugelli, and Carl Nyman play a central role in the industrial development in the Stavanger area. Some of them were also active in local politics.

It may be said that the Quaker society went through a period of integration in relation to the larger society. It became part of modern Norway. From the early 1880-ies and well into the new century, the Quaker society was struggling internally with major problems as new ideas wrestled with the older, but later on a positive renewal takes place.

Stagnation and frustration reach a peak in 1898 as the Quaker Clerk (Leader) hands over membership protocols to the County Governor because he refused to submit the names of conscripts. As of this year the Norwegian Society of Friends becomes a private religious organisation without the privileges of a registered church according to the act on dissenters. The society still continues to accept new members and carry out e.g. funerals as if it were a registered society.

The last years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th constitute a period of major change in the international Quaker society. The Society was modernised through a liberalising of the theology, a more positive attitude to research and education, and an acknowledgement of the social and ethical challenges inherent in modern industrial society.

A decisive event was the *Manchester Conference* in 1895, which in many ways initiated this development. Here the outline of modern Quakerism was shaped. One concrete result was the establishment of Woodbrooke College in Birmingham in 1903. Norwegian Quakers would make considerable use of this educational institution in the years to come. They brought the new ideas back to Norway and started a process that would also renew the Norwegian Society of Friends.

The Society of Friends and Modern Norway

At the same time there is a process of emancipation from British Quakers. In 1909 representatives of Norwegian Friends attend London Yearly Meeting. In 1920 several Norwegian Friends take part in the important *All Friends Conference* in London which discussed in particular the peace testimony as a fundamental expression of Quaker faith. The conference affirmed the liberal theology that commenced with the *Manchester Conference* in 1895.

Another event took place in 1920, which pointed in the same direction. Henry T. Hodgkin, Quaker, and a central person in the international Christian peace movement, visited Stavanger and spoke at meetings in Stavanger Cathedral, Betanien, and Totalen, which were all filled to capacity.

The peace testimony was the focal point. The visit was initiated by Ole F. Olden who, with Anna Andersen (jr.) and several young Friends, were promoters of the new ideas.

In 1922 we find the very first collection of money for the needy outside of Norway. The sum of 1 418 kroner was collected for the hunger victims in Russia. The money was forwarded through Friends Relief Committee in London. The contacts with British Friends continue, but more based on Norwegian terms. In 1924 Stavanger Friends are hosts to a meeting with British Friends. Activities increase during this period, especially among younger Friends. In 1935 Young Friends are gathered for an international camp at Aldegård outside Stavanger.

Meetings for worship are advertised in local papers from 1922, and social aspects are taken care of through social gatherings both at New Year and at yearly meetings. Yearly meeting in 1928 appears to summarise this positive development: "It was one of those yearly meetings which will remain as a lasting memory." At this time the smaller rural groups gradually disappear.

In 1931 the question of renewed official registration as a religious society comes up again, but is not implemented till 1936. Then the revised act on dissenters and the new act on Conscientious Objection had solved most of the problems that bothered Quakers during the 19th century. At re-registration the Society had 73 adult members.

Throughout the 19th century the Quaker society had produced a number of publications, from larger books (Barclay and Fox) to smaller tracts, but no periodical. The Norwegian-American Friend John Fredrik Hanson produced three volumes of a periodical called *Vennen* (The Friend) in 1900 - 1902, and there was repeated talk about the need for a periodical.

The idea did not materialise until Ole F. Olden in 1937 started producing *KVEKEREN*. It was originally intended to be a Scandinavian periodical, and there were Danish and Swedish articles in the first volumes. During the war, when publication in Norway became impossible, one number came out in Denmark. But it gradually became a Norwegian periodical, and *Nordisk Kväkartidskrift* with a Nordic profile started in Sweden in 1949. Gradually this turned into a Swedish *Kväkartidskrift* (1974). It has been difficult to get Nordic cooperation to work in this area. *Tidsskriftet Kvekeren* has meant a lot both as a link between Norwegian members and to represent Quakers outward, an aspect which was emphasised by the next editor, Wilhelm Aarek.

In 1978 the Norwegian Quaker Publishing House was formed and has produced about 40 booklets and books, same also in Danish, Swedish, and English.

Quaker relief work began to take more definite shape when *Kvekerhjelp* was organised in 1940. The first major activity was the *Column for Germany* in 1947, the year in which Quaker Service organisations in England and USA won the Nobel Peace Prize. A column of 30 trucks with more than 55 tons of food, clothes, soap, cod liver oil, and other essentials left from the South-West of Norway for Hamburg.

Later projects in Kabylia (Algeria) (1963 - 1973) and smaller projects in several other countries followed. Today the Change Agent Peace Programme (CAPP) in Central Africa is *Kvekerhjelp*'s main project. In many ways *Kvekerhjelp* represents new ideas and methods in development work through the Change Agent programmes in Uganda and CAPP in Central Africa.

We should not forget that Norwegian Friends on Sigrud Helliesen Lund's initiative during the period of 1959 - 1990 developed Lindgrov School and Home for Mentally Handicapped Youth outside Risør. This project contributed new ideas to national policies concerning training and work as aspects of the care for the mentally handicapped.

Administratively the Norwegian Society of Friends has consisted of Worship Groups, Monthly Meetings and Yearly Meeting. For a few years after 1818 there was a Monthly Meeting in Christiania, but Oslo Monthly Meeting was not established until 1952, in addition to the meeting in Stavanger. In 1975 a Monthly Meeting was established in Kristiansand.

In addition there has been a broadly representative half-yearly committee or council (Samfunnsrådet). Various other concerns have their own committees. Traditionally the Society has had a Clerk as leader. In the 1960-ies there was a troika of Clerks, and in later years there has been a working committee alongside the Clerk. The Clerk is also the one who, in addition to serving as leader of the internal functions, is responsible for complying with the requirements of Norwegian authorities.

Throughout the history of Norwegian Friends, there have been worship groups in a number of places. Today there are permanent worship groups in Stavanger, Bergen, Oslo and Kristiansand, and less regular worship groups in Vestfold, the Lillehammer area, Trondheim and Farsund. Both Oslo and

Stavanger got new premises in 1993, the year in which Norwegian Friends celebrated their 175th anniversary. In Kristiansand Quakers share premises with a number of other peace related organisations.

Throughout the 20th century there have been frequent international contacts both formally and informally. FWCC has been important in creating a network between different Yearly Meetings. Peace and Service work, in recent years the Peace Tax issue, Geneva Summer School and Youth Pilgrimages as well as European Young Friends have served to create friendships across national boundaries.

Various international trends have had their influence on the Norwegian Quaker Society. There is still reason to venture that the Nordic Quaker Societies have developed their own distinctive character as Quakers, marked by the Nordic version of social democracy, a firmly established faith in human rights, and the role of the Nordic countries as non-great-powers. Nordic Quaker cooperation has never been fully successful. Since 1945 Nordic Summer Gatherings have perhaps been the most important example of Nordic cooperation in addition to sending representatives to one another's Yearly Meetings.

The Society of Friends in Post-Modern Society

It may be correct to state that modernity in connection with Quakers lasted until some time in the 1970-ies. Examples are Kvekerhjelp's Kabylia project as a "Total community development programme", participation in modern movements such as the large popular movements against NATO and EEC, as well as in the Anti-Nuclear movement. Internationally Quaker research has been concerned with peace, conflict, and development research. It has been characteristic of modernity to be looking outward, towards the larger problems.

Post-modernism began to assert itself in international Quaker circles from the 1980-ies, influenced by the new spirituality represented by the New Age movement. The perspective turns inward. Quakers become less visible in the public debate. Finding oneself in the spiritual sense becomes more important than the major projects.

Among liberal Friends in both USA and Great Britain, the centre of gravity shifted to a form of individualism that contains a veritable spectre of religiousness and trans-religiousness of differing ideological and theological platforms: Universalist Quakers, Buddhist-Quakers, etc., participation in two or more religious movements at the same time. There is experimentation with new forms of worship and new forms of Friendly gatherings.

Many new activities have come in addition to the traditional, e.g. various forms of meditation, healing, spiritual dancing and singing, theatre and exercises focusing on the body-spirit relationship. We have seen a creative plurality, but at the same time it has been difficult to find a common focus and plot a common course forward. Much time has been given to considerations of what the purposes and functions of the Quaker Society should be in our own time and in future. It is also typical that Quaker research has become more introspective, concerned with its own history and religiousness.

To what extent and in which ways have these trends manifested themselves in Norway? What have been the characteristic traits in the Norwegian Society of Friends during the last 10 years of the 20th century and until today? We have seen a slight, but even growth in membership, but with differences between the three Monthly Meetings. Yearly Meetings have been held at Folk High Schools, and arranged with the participation of whole families, children, youth and adults of all ages, in mind.

More time has been set aside for social gathering than on organisational or business matters. The Quaker Centre idea, focusing on spiritual growth and renewal has been realised in the form of Silent week-ends (retreats), All Ages week-ends, Children's week-ends, study tours to Quaker England, and other arrangements.

It has been easier to get people to come together for single events than for series of meetings. Concerns that have exercised Friends have been revision of *Advices and Queries*, and the constitution of the Society, and above all how to promote spiritual growth and renewal. The Peace Tax Concern has been brought before Parliament, and the CAPP project has impressed many, not least outside Quaker circles.

We have tried to strengthen networks both through visitation and by producing Quaker News, and integration of children and youth into the Quaker community has been in focus. Quaker Fellowship -

what it is and how to strengthen it - has been our theme at some Yearly Meetings and also discussed in Monthly Meetings.

To some extent it may be said that post-modern characteristics have made their mark upon the Society of Friends in Norway and caused some fragmentation of activities, but at the same time one may discern a certain power, which may not always be equally obvious and conscious, that carries the Society forward. I believe we may be characterised as a society of friends amongst whom love for one another is alive, but where we have to strive to make our fellowship function even better and more clearly.

Sources:

Unpublished material gathered by Faith Ann Sevilä

Hans Eirik Aarek: "Quakers and the Modern Norway", pp. 77 - 90 in: *Free Churches, Low Churches, the Labour Movement, and the Modern Norway (1880 - 1920)*, edited by Ingunn Folkestad Breistein and Dag Nygaard. Oslo 2002.

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