

Byberry Friends Meeting: One Model for Revitalization

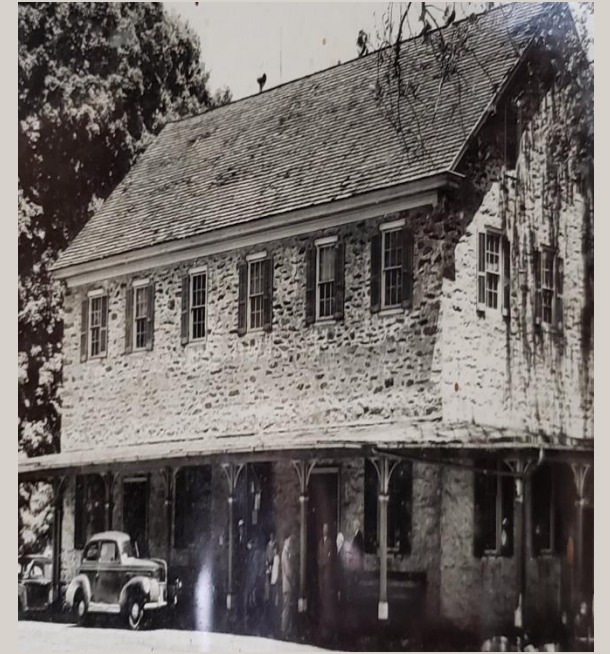
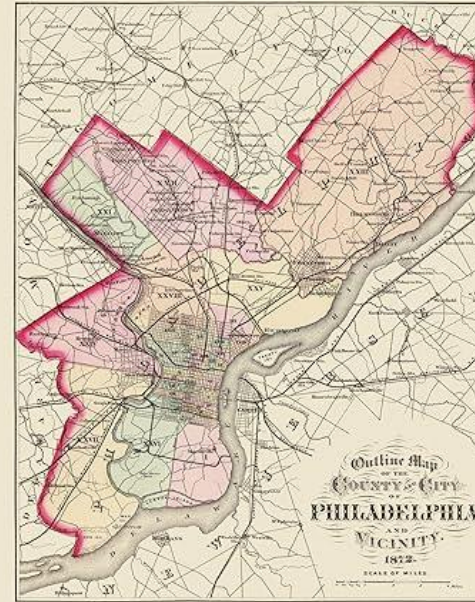
A Discussion of a Shoemaker Fund Grant awarded to
Byberry Friends Meeting, Upper Dublin Friends
Meeting, and Abington Quarterly Meeting;
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

Background on Byberry Friends Meeting

Byberry Friends Meeting: Founded in 1682; located in Northeast Philadelphia; four historic buildings: meetinghouse, schoolhouse, Byberry Abolition Debate Hall, carriage/horse sheds.

Byberry Hall: Only abolition debate hall still standing in Philadelphia and one of only three in PA; built by African Americans Robert and Harriet Forten Purvis.

Byberry Hall: Hosted abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia and James Mott, Frederick Douglas, as well as Elizabeth Cady Stanton & Susan B. Anthony as antislavery issues gave way to women's right to vote in the late 1800s.



Troublesome Trends to Address:

Recent data from Friends World Committee for Consultation have revealed that between 2010 and 2020 there were 25% fewer Friends meetings in the United States and a 13% decline in membership in the Religious Society of Friends.

Data from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and other yearly meetings across the United States show similar trends.

For example:

Abington Quarter has nine meetings – two are “healthy”*

Bucks Quarter has 11 meetings – three may be considered “healthy”*

Other quarterly meetings in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting report similar trends.

*Healthy = rotating clerks; active committees to do the work of the meeting; spiritual education & young people; children are a part of the meeting.

The majority of small & struggling meetings don't have the capacity to respond to opportunities for growth when they occur.

For the past 20 years, the Thomas and Mary Shoemaker Fund has been experimenting with and seeding efforts to reverse this trend.

By investing millions of dollars in creative and innovative programs and projects to revitalize the Religious Society of Friends, the Shoemaker Fund trustees have been trying to address this problem and turn around the downward trajectory.

Some of these include:

School of the Spirit	New York & New England Yearly Meetings
Thee Quaker Podcast	Baltimore Yearly Meeting
FWCC – Quaker Connect	Pendle Hill
Quaker Voluntary Service	Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
Friends Cmte on National Legislation	Friends General Conference
Byberry Friends Meeting	Radnor Friends Meeting

There have been some creative and wonderful successes, but clearly not enough as the downward spiral continues.

WHAT CAN WE DO???

In the view of the Shoemaker Fund trustees, *monthly meetings are the place from which spiritual authority, witness, and community engagement spring.*

Monthly meetings are our base. But in almost all yearly meetings in the United States, we have atrophied at that base.



What are our options?:

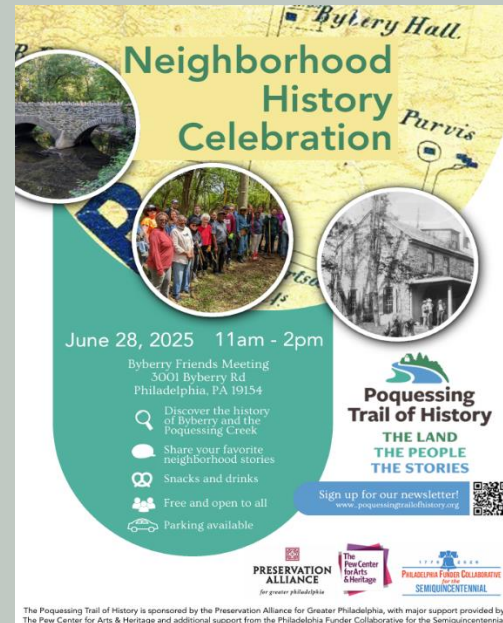
- 1.) Creating models & joint programs
- 2.) Adaptive reuse of meeting houses
- 3.) Creating new models of collaboration

OR

- 1.) Lay meetings down
- 2.) Hospice for meetings
- 3.) Mergers between meetings

A New Model To Consider: *The Byberry Friends Model*

An organizing model to engage the local community at the grassroots level & to steer efforts to revitalize the meeting



Funded by Shoemaker for a two-year grant (2020-2022)

Expanded for 2023-2025 to include Upper Dublin Meeting & Abington Quarterly Meeting

The Byberry Friends Model

- Hiring a Community Engagement Coordinator whose role is to bring people who might be considered “Seekers” into the Meeting. By that, we mean “Seekers of God’s Truth.”
- The Community Engagement Coordinator’s role is not to “convert” any seeker – but to bring folks in the door.
- It is the collective responsibility of Meeting members to create a warm and welcoming environment so that those new seekers want to come back.
- The Coordinator should create strong communication vehicles, digital tools, website hosting, & social media, and provide weekly hospitality.
- The Coordinator should live and be active in the local community or be willing to move there.



What were the Results?

For Byberry Friends Meeting:

We said we would double the number of attenders and increase membership from 17 to 20.

We have 1 new member and 4 new attenders.

- We hired our next Community Engagement Coordinator, Mike Doyle, who has continued to bring countless opportunities for community members to engage with Byberry Friends Meeting.
- We have hosted outreach events aimed at fostering connections within the surrounding neighborhoods. These initiatives have not only increased visibility for Byberry Friends Meeting but have also encouraged meaningful participation from both new and long-term community members. These events also brought us coverage in local news outlets.
- For example, in 2024 we held 8 outreach events at Byberry Meeting which brought over 200 community members to the Meeting. In 2025 we held 16 outreach events which brought over 500 community members to the Meeting. Our emerging task now is to make sure we educate them and warmly welcome them back.
- Byberry Friends Meeting, in this process, has created new outreach partnerships with other local organizations including Northeast Phila. History Network, Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia and Vicinity, The Society for the Preservation of African American Assets, Friends of the Poquessing Creek Watershed, Caring for Friends, Parkwood Civic Association and others.

What were the Results?

For Abington Quarterly Meeting:

- We said we would work with Abington Quarter to develop ideas and explore models that would work for them. **Abington Quarter created a new position of Communications Coordinator.** The Coordinator, Laura Lanza has developed three workshops on timely topics, supported small meetings with strategic thinking and advice, created short emails to generate interest in Quarterly Meeting, and is sending news flashes to each meeting highlighting things of interest from other meetings in the Quarter. She has also brought in guest speakers to help.

For Upper Dublin Meeting:

- We said we would support Upper Dublin's planning process to create their own ideas for the growth of their Meeting; its spiritual experience, influence, presence and importance in the Community. **The planning process was completed in 2025.** They decided to enhance their Unplug and Recharge efforts, rotate members taking up leadership roles and trying to get their own Community Engagement Coordinator. The process has brought members and new attenders together in exploring their vision for their meeting, already creating a renewed sense of shared responsibility and hope.