

A Look Backwards at Montreal Monthly Meeting

By Molly Walsh

Montreal Monthly Meeting reminds me of the “little engine that could.” Although it has faltered and sometimes been slowed down by circumstances, the meeting here has been a going concern since the early 1900s. The first recorded meetings took place in 1907 when McGill Professor Alfred Stansfield gathered some English Friends together for worship for a brief period of time.

Some 22 years later, another group was formed, again by McGill professors and this one endured. Eugene Forsey, a professor of Political Science at McGill (who later rose to prominence in Canadian politics) was one of the initiators, along with Lloyd Williams, from the Mathematics Department. Early meetings were held once a month at the Central YMCA. As the meeting gained in strength, meetings for worship were held weekly. The group met for a long period of time at the Presbyterian College of McGill and later met at the YWCA. Space for worship continued to be rented until the purchase of a meeting house in 1963.

During the late 1940s, the group attained the status of a Monthly Meeting under the aegis of Pelham Half-Yearly Meeting which was, at that time, part of Genesee Yearly Meeting.

Subsequently, of course, Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) came into existence and Montreal Monthly Meeting became a part of CYM. We are not part of a half-yearly meeting but we participate in the St. Lawrence Regional Gathering, made up of Ottawa, Peterborough-Wooler, and Thousand Islands meetings.

Over the course of several years, Montreal Monthly Meeting sponsored an annual series of five lectures; three by non-Friends and two by Friends. Friends General Conference offered financial help to bring such Quaker luminaries as Henry J. Cadbury, Anna Brinton, Rufus M. Jones and Paul S. Cadbury to Montreal. Invited speakers who were not Friends included well-known philosopher Professor Hocking of Harvard, and Louis Finkelstein, president of the Jewish Theological

Seminary in New York. A fruitful dialogue between French Canadians and English Canadians was initiated by the meeting in cooperation with the Monchanin Intercultural Centre.

The establishment of a permanent meeting space in 1963-64 was welcomed by the growing number of members and the wider community. Under the leadership of Lloyd Williams and a core of dedicated members, a lovely small house was found downtown close to the old Forum. Jonas Lehrman, of the McGill School of Architecture, offered his professional advice around the remodelling, decorating and furnishing. Some local



*Jacques Loranger, Clerk of Montreal Monthly Meeting
(photo by Donald Alexander)*

Friends, as well as Toronto Monthly Meeting, Friends General Conference and Quaker Truists in England helped to underwrite the purchase. Many individuals contributed to the meeting house fund as well, some from as far away as Australia and Africa.

The presence of a Quaker Meeting House in Montreal proved to be a boon during the late 1960s and early 1970s with the steady influx of U.S. draft resisters and deserters seeking refuge with committed pacifists.

Margaret Watts remembers driving south to the border to pick up young Americans at the border. After their arrival in Montreal, housing and hospitality were offered to them until they could get on their feet. Often they were directed to other safe Friendly havens across Canada. Tony Meech and Liesel Urtnowski recall driving to the border to receive funds collected in the United States to be spent on medications to go to Vietnam. Before the Americans bearing funds were allowed to cross the border, Customs officials read them the "Trading with the Enemy Act!" Vivien Abbott was on hand to offer her expertise with this project. Our members packed the medicines in three batches to go to both South and North Vietnam as well as the Viet Cong. Liesel, who was much involved in this project, remembers driving the packages to Aeroflot at Dorval

airport. In the 1970s, with the arrival of the "boat people" from Southeast Asia, the meeting cooperated with the Roman Catholic Newman Centre to provide housing and support for a Cambodian couple who sought refuge in Canada.

The Meeting House continued to flourish during the sixties and seventies and for much of that time there was a thriving First Day School. By the mid-1980s, the house became impossibly expensive to maintain. In 1986, the members of the meeting reluctantly agreed to sell the Meeting House to Chez Doris, a day centre for homeless women.

Since 1986, our place of worship has moved from the premises of the Concordia chaplaincy, to the Good Shepherd Centre, and next to the Yellow Door, the site of McGill Chaplaincy. Three years ago, we found a congenial new home at the Greene Avenue Community Centre in Westmount, where we worship in a large sunny room. Attendance at our Sunday morning worship has doubled since we moved into these premises.

We are also pleased to have a bilingual Worship Group under our care, the Lac Cornu Worship Group from St-Hippolyte in the Laurentians. Many members of our Montreal group are fluent in French and we are pleased that we occasionally attract francophones. We have a bilingual website at: <http://www.geocities.com/quaker292001/>. It has proven useful for outreach though we are aware that we lack sufficient printed material in French.

In recent years, we have welcomed several Young Friends (from Meetings as far away as Alaska and as close as Ottawa). They bring a renewed sense of commitment to social justice issues, which we value.

"Small is beautiful" could be one way to describe Montreal Monthly Meeting, but I prefer to think of Montreal Meeting as the "little meeting that could," which has survived despite many homes and changes over the last one hundred years. ☺

Sources: Pamphlet entitled "Papers published on the occasion of the opening of Meeting House and Friends Centre, April 25th, 1964" and interviews with members.

Molly Walsh is a member of Montreal Monthly Meeting.

