

Thumbnail History of IYM Experience with Books of Discipline

“Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends was established the 13th day of the Ninth month, A.D. 1875, at Clear Creek, in Putnam County, Ill., under minutes of approval from Baltimore and Indiana Yearly Meetings, by the joint action of the members of Prairie Grove Quarterly Meeting, Iowa, and Blue River Quarterly Meeting in Indiana and Illinois.”

– *Rules of Discipline and Advices of Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends*, 1878

Illinois Yearly Meeting was established in 1875 and adopted its first book of discipline three years later, in 1878. The book included “as a bond of union... a statement of faith and principles as held by our body.” It included statements on gospel ministry; speech, deportment, and apparel expected of Friends; and testimonies regarding war, oaths, secret societies, days and times, gaming and places of diversion, and civil government. It provided for “Overseers and treatment for deviations” as well as for “appeals” of disciplinary actions. More familiar elements of the book of discipline addressed procedures for membership, marriage, meetings for business, and the organization of the yearly meeting.

In 1892 Illinois Yearly Meeting published a slightly revised version of its *Rules of Discipline and Advices of Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends*. A quick comparison identified only two changes in the Discipline. The last sentence of the discussion of war was changed to improve its clarity, and the part of the section on Representative Committee that dealt with what constituted a quorum was changed, a change that had been approved already in 1881. Otherwise, the two editions appear to be identical. Apart from these two changes, the original book of discipline served Illinois Yearly Meeting for 45 years. During these years the Yearly Meeting grew at first and then settled into a long decline in both numbers of individuals and numbers of monthly meetings. These trends were tied in some measure to the demographic changes taking place in Illinois as a whole, but it is likely as well that Illinois Yearly Meeting like other yearly meetings had lost its vitality and needed renewal.

One force for renewal was brought about by the inauguration and growth of Friends General Conference. In 1927 the seven (Hicksite) yearly meetings “coordinated in the Friends’ General Conference” drew up a uniform book of discipline: *The Book of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends: Christian Practice [and] Business Procedure*. This was adopted by Illinois Yearly Meeting in 1927 and by the other six yearly meetings at about the same time. It provided for revision by the yearly meeting and there seems to have been no expectation that the discipline would continue to be uniform throughout the future. The 1927 book of discipline differs from the original Illinois Yearly Meeting book of discipline. Perhaps most noteworthy is a difference in the tone used to describe the duties of Overseers. These duties are in 1927 to be essentially pastoral in character and to involve encouraging members to be faithful in the performance of their duties. No provision was made for appeal,* perhaps because the Overseers were not expected to take the sort of action that it would make sense to appeal.

**Editor’s note:* This statement is incorrect; the 1927 discipline presents a detailed procedure for appeals of disownments on pp. 86–88.

Friends General Conference never revised the uniform discipline. A new spirit of ecumenism was working its way through the Religious Society of Friends. For example, when Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Hicksite) reprinted the 1927 discipline in 1942, it added some material on United monthly meetings, meetings which had become affiliated with another yearly meeting in addition to the (Hicksite) Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. As time went by yearly meetings from different streams of the Society which shared the same, or overlapping, geographical areas united. This required much prayerful consideration of the faith and practice of Friends in both yearly meetings. The two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings united and produced in 1955 a thoroughly new *Faith and Practice of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends: A Book of Christian Discipline*. Other unified yearly meetings did likewise. The uniform discipline of 1927 ceased to be uniform.

Books of discipline within the Religious Society of Friends change over time to reflect the changes within the yearly meetings which have them. Whether these changes are welcome or not, this change in books of discipline is a matter of both integrity and utility. The 1927 *Discipline* became out of print and badly dated. Illinois Yearly Meeting was faced with the choice of writing its own, new or revised, book of discipline or adopting another yearly meeting's book of discipline.

In 1957 Illinois Yearly Meeting adopted the 1955 Philadelphia *Faith and Practice*. The immediate advantage of doing so, escaping the arduous work of writing its own, was obvious. The disadvantages were evident as well. Illinois Yearly Meeting was, and is much different than Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. It is much smaller in number of meetings and number of individual members, while at the same time covering a much larger geographical area. The Illinois Yearly Meeting monthly meetings are much more widely dispersed, making quarterly meetings more difficult to attend. The real and financial properties of the yearly meetings, their quarterly meetings, and their monthly meetings are vastly different. It was necessary for Illinois Yearly Meeting to employ Philadelphia's *Faith and Practice* as a guide, rather than a governing discipline. A page was drawn up listing differences in procedure between Illinois Yearly Meeting and those described in the formally adopted Faith and Practice from Philadelphia. This page was also approved in 1957 as an addendum to the Faith and Practice. So developed a trend toward operating without a discipline and toward looking to books of faith and practice for "guidance" of how to proceed, but guidance that is disregarded if it seems at odds with IYM practice.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting adopted a significantly revised Faith and Practice in 1972, but Illinois Yearly Meeting continued to look to the 1955 edition for its guidance. Finally, in 1991 Illinois Yearly Meeting approved the following minute:

"Currently we look for guidance to the 1955 edition of *Faith and Practice* of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) with an additional page listing differences in procedure in IYM. The problem is this edition is no longer in print and many Meetings currently use the 1972 edition of the PYM *Faith and Practice*. Much discussion followed as to how to best address this problem. Subsequently approval was given to adopt the current PYM *Faith*

and Practice as our working document. It is acknowledged that there exists a need to update material in the current PYM *Faith and Practice* so it is pertinent to the IYM constituency....”

It is instructive that Illinois Yearly Meeting never published a page listing differences between the 1972 book of discipline and IYM practices. Furthermore, monthly meetings in Illinois Yearly Meeting have consulted and continue to consult the books of discipline of many different yearly meetings. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting adopted a significantly altered *Faith and Practice* in 1997, and its most recent version was published in 2002. No careful study of the differences between IYM faith and practice and those laid out in the most recent Philadelphia books of discipline has been made by Illinois Yearly Meeting.