

West Hills Friends Church

By Stephen W. Angell, Mark Cannon, and Abigail Pratt-Harrington

Origins

Our team visited West Hills Friends Church in Portland, Oregon. It began about 1988, so it is close to 28 years old, as part of a church plant of Northwest Yearly Meeting, part of Evangelical Friends Church International.¹ Our information about the origins of West Hills Friends Church comes from a group interview with eight of the founders who became a part of the congregation between 1988 and 1992. We have changed the names of the members of West Hills Friends in order to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

In 1988, the church was known as Maplewood Friends. In August, 1988, Marshall and Eileen Henley drove west from Princeton, New Jersey, where Marshall had attended seminary, and Marshall became pastor of the church. It is at that point that the church, located in the hills west of the Willamette River, became known as West Hills Friends Church. Bart Jones, well known to Friends as a long-time member of the faculty at George Fox University, had preceded Marshall as pastor. One Friend stated, “The idea was that Maplewood was a meeting that had become very small, and the yearly meeting was looking to sort of give a rebirth to the meeting.” One founding member recalled the attractiveness of “growing a new church, including a new name.”

Someone from the Board of Evangelism of Northwest Yearly Meeting had contacted Marshall to offer him the position. His contact told him that they had purchased a church planting program from someone who was a member of what was then Southwest Yearly Meeting. There were several other churches in Washington and

Oregon, within Northwest Yearly Meeting, that used this program at roughly the same time. (In 1993, Southwest Yearly Meeting changed its name to Evangelical Friends Church Southwest.) According to Marshall,

It was basically a top-down marketing campaign. . . . This guy, his core idea was the law of large numbers. It boiled down to if you call 10,000 people, you can get a thousand to agree to be on your mailing list, then you can get 100 to come to visit your church at a single event. It was really more driven from marketing than by theological or liturgical preferences. . . . We had the full committee come out, and they installed rows of phone banks outside our building.

Marshall told a humorous story about this stage in the church's life:

I actually remember when the phone guy came out, he was walking within that space between the building and the fence. It was in September, and there were tons of spiders. He said, "I know Quakers are pacifists, but some of you kill spiders." I am not sure how I answered. I get feelings on the subject.

Marshall recalled how the phone campaign turned out:

It was stressful. You would call people at dinner time. It was a fiasco. But it was worth it for us, because it was an opening to come from seminary to be part of a Quaker ministry in Portland, Oregon [different from the demographics of many Friends Meetings in Northwest Yearly Meeting; most others were rural.] Eileen and I felt most at home in a place like Portland or Seattle. And there honestly weren't that many opportunities. We were 24, and it felt like even if this is a complete disaster, we can maybe have an opportunity for another start. . . . We did

get some 150 people here the first Sunday, [the grand opening was July 25, 1988] but it wasn't people who were looking for a community or any connections. It was just kind of odd. ... It was not a complete failure by any means, but given the amount of energy that went into that, compared to other things that we've done over the years, I'm not sure I would do it again.

Other methods of outreach also were used. The church set up a literature table at community events downtown in the early 1990s. One future member recalled that she signed up for the newsletter at one of these events. She found it to be brilliant, and worked up her nerve to come to visit. So it was not just telephone contacts, but also face-to-face contacts that brought in new members.

One mother, with a newborn daughter, lived in the neighborhood, and enjoyed being able to walk to church with her daughter on Sunday mornings. Another couple had been in a (religiously) mixed marriage: she was Presbyterian, he was a Catholic. The husband liked the small size of the congregation, and also that the Quakers liked to play baseball. Early in the church's existence, they met on Sunday evenings, in order to free Marshall and Eileen to visit local churches and introduce themselves.

There were always many people involved in this new and exciting endeavor. Marshall Henley recalls, "It was amazing to me that the group of people who had been part of Maplewood were so willing to just change everything that they did to make room for us and who we were. Not all of them stuck around, but a lot of them did and became key leaders."

As they grew up, their strategies of outreach have changed. Today, they rely a great deal on word of mouth. Another Friend says, jokingly, "Is 'getting in trouble' our marketing

strategy?” Marshall Henley observes, “It is remarkable how the digital age has changed the landscape for us. A lot of people now first encounter us on our website.” Before the digital age, it was difficult to find the Meeting, but now everyone can find them with their GPS. If you used to meet somebody, “you’d have to go into a public space and get the attention of someone that you didn’t know in a face-to-face kind of way. And the world is not just like that anymore. I think that there are people who follow us on Facebook and look at our website for a long time now before they show up.”

They treasured their sense of place. Their West Hills neighborhood “used to be dairy land, a very rural part of Portland. Now it’s thirty minutes to downtown, but then it had its own schoolhouse, and its own place out in the country. The people here were fairly rural people. That’s how they grew up. That was their culture and city folks were aliens to them in a very real way. And for them to be open to that new experience was remarkable.” Marshall was invited to interview at another Friends’ congregation in Salem, Oregon. The Salem Friends were from a very similar place, a rural area that was rapidly urbanizing, but they did not seem to be as open to experimentation as the Friends at West Hills. The Henleys thus were not diverted from their plans to minister at West Hills. Regarding the early leaders at West Hills, Marshall recalls,

The people who were part of it were making space for something new to happen.

It was a remarkable gift of leadership. These were people who had been so invested in the community. They did things like figure out how many water heaters that they could turn off to see an extra three dollars a month, so that they could keep the door open that much longer. They were very invested in trying to keep this place going. They cared a lot, and because they cared, they were willing to try something new. It took a lot of courage and a lot of creativity.

Some of the leaders were now deceased, but the Friends present spoke lovingly of these deceased Friends, and could still feel their presence. Of one such Friend, it was said, “She’s passed on, but she’s still here.” This Friend had once talked about a decision that had been made in a business meeting, a decision that she was not happy with. She said, “I wasn’t against it enough to object, but I was against it enough that I had to pray.” Friends felt that exemplified the openness that was prevalent at the time. She had “the touch with new people,” and she “made everybody feel welcome.”

One of the other founding members offered, as a reason for the church’s success, Marshall’s success in exemplifying the Quaker ideal of an equipping ministry,² where, in a relatively non-hierarchical fashion, the paid minister sees it as a major responsibility to facilitate the ministry of others in the community:

Marshall was sharing leadership, really inviting people to get involved. If people had an idea, or a direction, or a calling that they felt inside, Marshall would say in a supportive way, “How would you like to act on that?” He was really encouraging. One reason that the meeting became so healthy was that leadership was shared with guidance and support. Those two factors together, they’re welcoming, and also they’re an encouragement for people to act and get involved, was really important.

Marshall calls this a “servant culture” or an “invitational culture.”

One Friend contrasted her experience at West Hills Friends with her former congregation, a Presbyterian Church where she and her husband worshipped through the service but never had occasion to speak to anyone. This was unsatisfying for her. She wanted to come somewhere that

she could “grab a hold,” in other words, to contribute. West Hills Friends has been such a place for her, as she has successively worked in such roles as flower decoration, clerking the fundraising committee.

There’s an opportunity to make friends at West Hills Friends very quickly. People volunteer to share their musical gifts, or to offer the “First Word.” (The First Word is a shorter message, three to five minutes in length, toward the beginning of the worship, offered by a different person each week. A longer message, ten to twelve minutes, from the pastor or someone else comes later in the worship service.) From the beginning of the congregation’s history, Friends were encourage to share about what they loved, and what they did not like to do. Practically, this ended up having a great influence on nominations to committees. One positive outcome was that West Hills Friends developed “Faith in Action” Teams (FIAT) working on social justice concerns. One Friend recalled “I started just doing whatever I wanted, and nobody ever complained. Things like that, we just had the freedom to do.”

Eventually, however, West Hills Friends had to develop methods of discernment in order to determine right courses of actions for its members. As Marshall Henley explains:

At one point, there was some conversation around having mistakenly created a culture of permission, where people would say something like, “Can I start a newsletter? Can I start this committee?” And we would go “Okay.” They would think that this meant that there would be some support for them. Eventually we learned from experience that we have to be a little more careful about what it means not to create barriers for people. We had to communicate clearly. If what you’re asking for is permission, that’s easy. If what you’re really asking for is,

how can you get other people to invest in doing the big thing that you want them to do, that you have energy for, then we need to have a more careful conversation around that.

As another member of West Hills explained, they tell newcomers that “we are here to encourage you to bring something new, rather than convince us to do something different. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

Still, the invitational culture persisted and contributed greatly to the strength of West Hills Friends. Some time ago, a member complained about Marshall Henley’s Mother Day message, feeling that it had not engaged the holiday themes very deeply. In an open, non-defensive manner, Marshall responded, “Would you like to give the Mother’s Day address next year?” The member took Marshall up on this offer, and her message was really good.

The spiritual basis of the meeting has shifted over the decades. One member noted “from the beginning, this has been a Christ-centered meeting. But there’s a sort of people now who are maybe not Christ-centered.” For her husband, coming to West Hills Friends is a social event, an occasion to celebrate family and community ties; he comes about twice a year. Now “the heart of the meeting ... is just not as Christ-centered. That’s just me talking.” Others work to specify the spiritual orientation of the meeting today: “This is where people come who really want to start this work of transformation and obedience. Obedience to that part of the voice inside that they recognize as being whatever they want to call it – God, Christ, something of fire. ... There are lots of ministries that have come out of that.”

Another member noted that the considerable geographical spread of West Hills Friends now constrains the kind of ministries that they can do together. Some Friends live more than 25

miles away, and only are able to come to West Hills once a week. “So the picture you’ve been getting from us, I think, is in some ways a little bit rosy. When new people come in on Sunday, we see each other once a week, and we’re often connecting with each other. So the visitor doesn’t necessarily get greeted perfectly, and the visitor doesn’t get taken out to lunch afterwards, usually.” (It should be noted, however, that this Friend and his spouse took the visitation team to Earlham out to dinner after the interview. So this ministry of hospitality is clearly of concern to some.)

He stated that the reason that he has been coming to West Hills Friends for more than 20 years is that is “not innocuous.” He treasures the image of “being in a crucible, where we get together and whoever we are, whatever we’re doing spiritually, we throw ourselves into this, and we melt once a week. And we come out and then go out and do what we do for the week.”

Another Friend stated, “I come expecting to experience God here. I come expecting to experience God, and there are many times I don’t. And I know that that’s me and wherever I’m coming from at that moment.” But that continues to be her expectation, to experience God. She also meets her community, but if it was just community, “I can get my community in the pool. I can find community in my garden home library.”

The previous Friend added an image from John Punshon’s *Encounters with silence*, that at West Hills Friends, sitting in silence, he feels the “life searching” him. That can happen here. Another Friend, when she teaches Sunday School, would listen to a tape of the worship service in her car, and is profoundly moved by listening to the silence. She understands “how we come together as a community in the silence.” Marshall Henley reflects that “there’s always tension in the community between those folks who show up read to do 400-level work” and those who are

at a more basic level and who don't know what to do with the silence. "The healthy dynamic of this community is that it's not just a 400-level graduate course in Quakerism. Or if it is, it's a recognition that for it to work at that level, it also has to work in a way that continues to provide openings for people who are showing up, and playing beautiful instruments in your symphony, and making crazy noises with them because we're still trying to figure out how it works."

As another Friend said, "I hadn't realized that Quakers could be so different from one another." She appreciated the work of West Hills members who have taken as their concern getting people to work together so they can appreciate "the commonality and depth that we do share." As she became clear that God was important for her, she was wanting to find "that God-centered place within a pretty open liberal context." Over the years, some people have left West Hills for opposite reasons: some feeling it wasn't liberal enough, others feeling that it wasn't traditional enough. "The beauty of the community here is that either people have that God-centered focus themselves, or they're drawn to a community that lives that and allows a lot of space for people to be who they are while they explore their spirituality in that context." She learned a lot from going to Northwest Yearly Meeting, where they met with people who thought very differently from West Hills Friends. Still, "we had clarity in our hearts as to who we are and we engaged in loving listening for people who see it differently." Before going to yearly meeting, West Hills Friends would sometimes gather "to just prepare ourselves and have a sense of community among ourselves about being lovingly receptive and welcoming."

One thing that they had to convey to the people at Northwest Yearly Meeting is "that we're not hierarchical." The Friend added, "and the pastor wasn't to blame for all of the ..." and her voice trailed off, as the group erupted in laughter. "We all have confidence that we have a voice, and we can use it." West Hills Friends have many leaders. "There are some usual suspects,

which have been here a long time.” One Friend mentioned that sometimes the children in West Hills Friends are leaders. “You never know when that voice will say, ‘Ah, stand up, stand up. It’s time for you.’ ... It can be a brand-new person who has walked in and stood that day.” One Friend used to skip the one Sunday a month when someone other than the pastor was giving the prepared message, but she no longer does that, “because we have grown as a community, and so the messages that are coming from the larger community have so much more meaning for me.” If somebody comes to Marshall Henley or other leaders and says, “I want to bring the message,” there may be conversation about it, “but we don’t say no.”

West Hills Friends agree that laughter is essential to their community. As Marshall Henley says, “Part of what makes us who we are is, the sense that it should be fun. And it’s okay to show up, even if the work is hard, in order to see the fun, the joy, the delight of being together to do the work. It’s a place where there’s lots of laughing.”

One Friend remarked that he’s a scientist. He’s also a professor, and he has several grants that are active, and these consume a lot of time. In the midst of his busy life, “if I’m going to be here, I want it to be real. And that’s what I come for. I don’t come here for safety. I come here for something real.” One Friend’s daughters were always wanting to come to Church, telling her father that “I feel like if I don’t come on Sunday, I might miss something.” So, at West Hills Friends, “there’s always the unexpected. There’s always something that resonates for you, and whether it’s somebody’s song, or somebody’s message, or somebody’s testimony, or open worship, or something happens at coffee hour, and that is so different from a tightly circumscribed, predictable, liturgical service. I agree, I come because I might miss something.” Another added “if you listen, if you’re listening for God, you got the support of the community. You might be asked to do stuff you don’t want to do, and that’s not innocuous.”

There are two people who are paid for their ministerial work, Marshall Henley and Luke Stanley. But Marshall observes that there are other paid employees. “We have a preschool that meets in this building, and we have found that we have a better relationship with them, if we actually pay someone to come and clean it to our satisfaction,” a wry observation that provoked more laughter.

One Friend noted, “What happens here enables people to go out and have their own ministries within the Portland area and beyond, so that there are people doing extraordinary things that are not necessarily West Hills centered. And West Hills often gives them the encouragement, the strings, the tools to do those other things. Our ministry is more of a web, than a focused-centered thing.”

Mark Cannon asked, “What do you do as far as building maintenance and upkeep?” Marshall Henley’s quick quip was, “Prayer and fasting.” This of course caused laughter to erupt again. Others observed that there is a Steward’s Committee, and that they will hire out some things that need to be done, such as tree trimming. The Music Committee hires a piano tuner. In rainy Portland, it has been necessary to replace roofs on two occasions. This was hardly an exhaustive list, as members of West Hills Friends recalled visits from painters, plumbers, fire inspectors, and others who have been involved with the upkeep of West Hills Friends.

Steve Angell asked, “Do participants mostly come from one faith tradition, whether it’s Quaker or something else, or do they come from multiple ones?”

One West Hills Friend observed, “there are a lot of people here who have walked out of other churches.” Many West Hills Friends have been wounded by other churches. Another observed, “we have very few birthright Quakers,” less than ten percent of the total membership.

But still, the birthright Friends are important, and they have some different needs than other West Hills Friends. West Hills Friends has had their struggles with the yearly meeting (see note 1), and birthright Friends have had an emotional attachment to the yearly meeting, so they react somewhat differently than other Friends to the yearly meeting struggles. Some of the birthright Friends come from evangelical pastored churches, while others come from the unprogrammed Friends tradition. Aided by digital outreach, gifts come from all over the world. With digital outreach, and publicity concerning their struggles with their yearly meeting, West Hills Friends became “real famous, real quick.”

According to Marshall Henley, birthright Friends will say, “I went to this meeting, and I just didn’t quite feel right. I went to another meeting, then I just had to buckle down. Now I’ll try West Hills. Did I just show up for something that wasn’t as awful as I thought it would be?” This provoked another round of laughter.

The children’s program has been a crucial element in the Meeting’s success. “Our children’s program is so strong. Godly Play has been a wonderful outreach. When families see what their children are getting through Godly Play, and they want that for them, so they stay.” Marshall Henley reflects, “Jean, an eight-year-old in our meeting, who had gone to Godly Play for three years, came up to me during the snack time a few weeks ago and was waiting patiently to talk. The person I was speaking with noticed that Jean was waiting, so invited her to say something. Jean said, ‘Oh, I don’t need to interrupt. When you are ready, I would like to talk to Marshall about something, so finish your conversation.’ I asked, ‘Jean, what’s up?’ She said, ‘Well, I just want you to know that I didn’t go to Godly Play today. I stayed in the worship with the grownups. During the time when people stand up and talk, I thought maybe I heard something to say, but then I realized, no, this something that I can just come by later.’ I said,

‘Great, that’s really good. What would you like to say?’ And she says, ‘Well, I just wanted you to know I have been reading the chronicles of Narnia [a series of books authored by C. S. Lewis], and in particular, about a horse and his boy.³ And there was something in there about a king, as someone who laughs loudest even when things were the saddest. I don’t want to be a king, but I do want to be somebody who laughs when things are sad. And I think that this is something that the Christian should do, and I want you to know that.’” Marshall concluded that this eight-year-old’s “spiritual development has been so informed by Godly Play” that she is able to participate meaningfully in the adults’ worship service.

One Friend states that West Hills Friends is “an unusually young congregation. Not only do we have a large children program, but we’ve got a large young adult group, as well as those oldsters which we’re all seeing here today. This is the youngest meeting and continues to be in terms of demographics.” Another Friend says, “Youth begets youth. I had a two-year-old daughter, and I wanted her to have playmates when she went to church. We were the youngest couple at the closest Presbyterian Church. I was like, ‘This people are dying.’” Friends mentioned West Hills’ “wonderful associate pastor in his late 20s,” Luke Stanley, “who is very, very dynamic with people of all ages. I do think that getting into trouble with the Yearly Meeting has helped to broaden our outreach toward the young people. I mean, we were the maverick bad boys in the Quaker world. The fact that we stuck our necks out, and we’re welcoming people’s curiosity toward many interests, has impressed people. The connection with George Fox University brings a community of young adults.” George Fox University, in Newberg, Oregon, is only 45 minutes away. It’s a substantial drive, but many George Fox students have come to West Hills Friends over the years.

Marshall Henley observed, “I’m so glad that you didn’t ask us, what are the failures that you’ve experienced over the last 27 years? But that is a big part of our story, too. We wouldn’t be who we are if we hadn’t come through those places of not getting it right, and not doing what you had hoped to do.” Having real resilience has been important, too, for West Hills Friends.

Stories from Recent Members

Camilla came to West Hills Friends a year-and-a-half ago. She left the Catholic Church at age 14, and practiced meditation and yoga for some time. She is from Chicago, and has previously been associated with Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. She has been a pacifist all of her life. “I believe in the body of Christ. I don’t need communion in order to share that with everyone.” She has been a silent Friend living in the Northwest since 1994. She moved to Portland seven years ago, and she expected to join one of the silent meetings. “We were having difficulty deciding which one to go to and visited West Hills once, and have been here ever since. It’s been wonderful.” In regard to her beliefs, she adds, “I am Christian. But even though nobody else here may believe in reincarnation and I do, it would never make a difference to me. Because I understand that as we live on earth and die, all we need is compassion and love.”

Mary was spiritually hungry for many years. “I’m among the silent Friends who would listen for God moving in their lives and follow it. It’s a little hard in a silent meeting the way they are now when people don’t really know each other, and they don’t trust each other a lot, to find people willing to share those movings. Here people trust each other, and it was clear to us when we first walked in, that this is a different community, this is really solid. The movings of God are part of what knits people together, and they express it really freely.”

Diana attends West Hills Friends with Mary. Diana serves on the Welcoming Ways Committee and has been involved in many Care Committees. “Mary spoke about how hungry we were for community. We find that expressed here, and people responding to the state of needs. I have been in silent meetings where we are not encouraged to do that. In fact, we’re encouraged just to be in prayer, because God meets the needs. I think we’re God’s hands.” Mary adds that “Diana has had a leading for two or three years or maybe more to attend Yearly Meeting from here, and witness to the LGBT situation there, and it’s been really grueling.” But a lot of West Hills Friends “came with us and supported us, and it was quite an amazing project.”

Susan first met Cassie, a Friend from West Hills at a meeting of the Friends World Committee for Consultation in Guatemala. “We had a long conversation about my spiritual journey. She told me that she was from West Hills.” That conversation made Susan interested to worship in the same place.

Letitia was raised Unitarian. She was not a Christian, and still does not consider herself to be Christian. “But my husband was Lutheran, and we had a kid, and I wanted community. I was looking for a place where we could all get along.” Locating West Hills through an advertisement, she talked to Marshall Henley, who assured her that West Hills Friends do not read creeds aloud. This was important to her because she feels that she cannot read a creed without lying. “And you know what? You hang around people long enough you sort of get spiritual, oh!” It has been a great experience both for her and her child.

Gary came to Quakers in his late thirties “after ditching the Catholic Church as soon as I could, which was about age 12. It was a place where I could talk about my experiences without judgment, and with authenticity and being encouraged to work from where I am, and be inspired

to work to be something better. I don't want to even talk in the doorway if I think I'm just going to get kicked in the teeth again, but I discovered it wasn't about doctrine. It was about focusing on the true life. So I said, 'Okay, well, I'll show up.' It's been about 13 years now."

Sarah's life "had really taken some pretty rough challenge. My husband had committed suicide, and I had five small children. I had been raised in an evangelical fundamentalist background. My parents were missionaries. I can't begin to tell you what it was to find a Quaker meeting that truly embodied what I understand Quakers to be about. In that community, we not only heal here, but we really thrived." She had pastored other Friends Churches in Northwest Yearly Meeting. "To me, West Hills, in our yearly meeting, is the healthiest and most exemplary Quaker meeting that I know. I feel so lovely to be a part of this community." She works with the Godly Play program, which respects children's spirituality.

Peter, who grew up Catholic, has been at West Hills since 1991. At that time, he was teaching English to high school juniors. His children were taking U.S. history, and when he borrowed their history book, he read about the Quaker William Penn buying land from the Indians. He looked Quakers up in the phone book, and West Hills was one of the closest Quaker meetings to his home, so he decided to attend. "Marshall told this incredible story, and I was in awe. Then the next week he told another one. Even from the very first, I just felt so at home." Peter helps out in various ways. He recycles plastic, and he buys really delicious Fair Trade chocolate and gives a piece to everybody. He has also invited Friends to do the dances of Universal Peace. "I love the consensus decision making process. I love that we think of children as people. There's really a sense of their being part of the community too. I love the faith that the light is in everyone, and the seeking, and the love and respect, and the humor."

Tom first attended West Hills in 2003. “I’m a lapsed Presbyterian and had been casting around, but not too seriously, for a church.” Walking through his neighborhood, he saw West Hills Friends, and thought that it was interesting that there was a Quaker church so close by. He finally talked himself into coming, and before Christmas, Marshall gave a message that included the word, ‘Star War action figures.’ That was pretty much a lock for me. I think it highlights the capacity of this community to meet you whoever you are or wherever you are. I was never a particularly spiritual person, but I feel encouraged to be that here, in a way that I’ve never encountered anywhere else.”

Stephanie started attending in 1997 or 1998. “It was a long, winding road to get here. And when I got here, I knew where I was, and that this was the place I need to be. Some of the things that have kept me here is the deep respect that I have found in so many ways. I have learned so much about it, and I’ve learned so much about generosity of spirit, and compassion and kindness. I have seen that people are welcome to be here in great pain and woundedness. They are also welcome to heal, and then they’re welcome to be in pain again. All are held up with grace and love.” Stephanie serves on the Pastoral Care Committee, and is also on the new Newsletter team. “These are very important to me because it’s part of how we tell the story of West Hills. Also I’m a greeter, because I really like to welcome people.”

Ellie began attending in 2012. “I grew up in a tradition that was certainly very patriarchal. I happen to be in a three adult family, and there are some of us who identify as bisexual, so it was really important for me to find a place that would welcome my whole family, as it is. We’ve got four kids. We went to a Unitarian congregation for a while. One of the adults in our family is very Christian and has a theology degree, one is an atheist, and then there’s me, and I kind of just don’t know what I am actually. I believe that there’s good in people. But the

Unitarianism didn't fit any of us very well. There were lovely people there, but what we realized was that we needed a real spiritual home. So I went looking for a Quaker meeting. I looked at the website for West Hills Friends, and came across their decision to welcome LGBT people. And I came, and I love the music. People are lovely and genuine. I met Marshall for coffee. I would ask things like, 'Are you liberal? Are you conservative? What are you? What am I signing up for?' I ultimately realized I was asking the wrong questions, and I actually need to be who I am. The openness was amazing." Ellie has served on various committees, including Music, Welcoming Ways, and Personal Care.

Rhonda has been at West Hills since 2010. She grew up as a Southern Baptist in Texas. In 1965, at age five, she gave her life to Christ at a Billy Graham crusade in Houston. Later she attended college and seminary. She was pulled towards Quakers, never thinking she would be a Friend. Then she took a break from church. She attended a United Church of Christ church in the Bay area in the late nineties, but "there were just so many words. They were good words, but I had heard all of it before, and I just found myself pulling away. I found myself not want to call myself a Christian, but a post-Christian follower of Jesus, because I'm beyond my Christian phase but still follow Jesus." In Portland, two musician friends, a week apart, told her about West Hills Friends. They got her in the door. The first song that Sunday morning was "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," a song she had sung as a child. "I just sat there crying and feeling drawn back into a faith community. It's been a stunning period of growth and great commitment to a connection with God that's not built on guilt and original sin. It's just so powerful." Rhonda serves on the Music Committee and is also on the board of elders. "I lead music pretty often. This church is unique in the churches I've ever been a part of, in that we pass music leadership around. You can lead the kind of music that speaks to you the most, or talk to someone on the

Music Committee and see if that kind of music can be brought in. It's unusual and it seems to work."

Luke was living in 2010 in Denver and finishing up a seminary degree in youth ministry. "I had reached a point out of school where I couldn't find a faith community that I could even attend, let alone pastor in. So I was kind of at my wits' end. I gave a last-ditch effort to find a job, searching an online database that posted ministry positions. When I saw the West Hill Friends listing, I said, 'I'll give it a shot.'" Two weeks later, he interviewed for the position, and while Marshall was driving him back to the airport, Luke asked, "Hey, will it be weird if I come to West Hills if I don't get the job?" Marshall replied, "Absolutely not, as long as it is not weird to you." Luke said, "Okay, good, because we're going to move here anyway, and this is going to be our church community."

"I think that when churches are having a hard time figuring out how to attract young adults, they ask questions about music and worship style. It was none of that for me. It's one of those mysterious things. When people ask about your spiritual life, they say, 'How did you come to know God?' And there's no words sometimes for that. But it was kind of an experience of community that I never had before in a faith community. On Sunday, sitting up here and hearing people stand up and share their hearts in a way that I never heard other Christians do in my life was transformational. It just blew my mind. I've been here now for five years as one of the pastors. I can't think of any other place I'd rather be."

Shirley was born in Northwest Yearly Meeting and her ancestors were Quaker, back to the time of George Fox. She has been a Quaker all of her life. "Being a Quaker is really important to me." She was attending another Quaker church that had big problems, and

eventually she just had to leave. She came to West Hills Friends the next Sunday. “Since I’ve been here, I just love it. I’ve been here since 2003 or 2004.” Shirley serves on a number of committees, including the Peace, Earth Concerns, and Hunger Committee. “I get to go around and count the kids and everything – and I sharpen pencils.”

Pauline grew up in the neighborhood, so she and her mom started with West Hills Friends. Subsequently, she studied at George Fox University, got married, and move to eastern Oregon, Bolivia, and Vancouver. In Vancouver, she questioned her pastor about something, and she replied, “Well, I am your pastor, and so you have to do what I say.” This did not make sense to her. In Vancouver, she went to a church that was a church plant, but that church died. She heard about West Hills, and thought that she wanted to go there, but it was very far. Eventually, they realized that her parents still lived two blocks away, and they could make it to West Hills, if they did two things at the same time. “West Hills was a refuge, and accepted us, and didn’t say, you are bad in any way. It was safe here. We’ve been here twenty years. There are so many people that have come here after something awful has happened in another church. They have come here, and they are safe. It’s okay to say, ‘I’m an atheist.’ And people will go, ‘Okay.’ It’s not like everybody tries to change you. They let you change because you’re loved. Also, I think one thing that’s really wonderful about here is, it’s funny. Laughing happens a lot. I just like being here, and I’m loved, and I like it.” Pauline is the Clerk of the Peace Committee.

Ken came with Pauline. “My first impressions were of a level of authenticity, and people were valued for who they were, rather than fitting into some kind of prescription about who they needed to be. That was a new experience for me. I was ready to find a Christian community that was based on love, compassion, and respect, rather than fear.” Ken also serves on the Peace Committee and helps out in the nursery during meeting.

Conclusion

There are several features that appear to have caused West Hills Friends to thrive in its nearly three decades of existence:

1. Their welcoming, invitational culture. It seeks to welcome everybody. It does not set up doctrinal or creedal tests, or other ways to exclude people. It seeks to be known for its hospitality and the warmth of its greetings. West Hills Friends has a “servant culture” or an “invitational culture.”
2. Their equipping ministry. West Hills Friends recognize that ministry is a gift, and that it can be difficult, and they have employed two highly skilled pastors in Marshall and Luke. The skill of their pastors should not be under-estimated as a reason for West Hills’ success in the area of ministry. But they also have taken seriously the Quaker emphasis on the universal ministry, one not limited by age or gender, and have successfully found ways to incorporate the ministerial gifts of all. The “First Word” has been a successful programmatic way to systematically incorporate the gifts in ministry of meeting members other than the pastors.
3. Its methods of outreach. West Hills Friends have successfully navigated the treacherous currents involved in the transition from a non-digital to a digital age. They have a very useful website that is a good recruiting tool. They have taken suitable advantage of press attention that comes their way. Both Marshall and Luke are very accessible to any journalist that may contact them.
4. Their nurture of children, and incorporation of children into meeting life. The “Godly Play” program has been a successful paradigm for organizing religious education

- activities. In addition, children are encouraged to share their leadings with the meeting.
5. The content of West Hills Friends activities has been marked by authenticity or the quality of being “not innocuous.” This is a difficult category to describe with any precision, but it is very important. The following words are used by the members of West Hills Friends to describe their meeting: courage, creativity, resourcefulness, resilience, transformation, obedience, community, humor, freedom of thought and expression, compassion, love, respect for others, generosity of spirit. All of these qualities seem to be tied up with the authenticity that people commonly experience at West Hills Friends. One Friend’s statement that, at West Hills, “life is searching him” puts the matter in a more mystical vein. They recognize that change, whether personal or corporate, is not easy; such change is sometimes likened to a crucible.
 6. West Hills Friends have been heavily involved in service to others in the community. There are active committees addressing such issues as Peace, Earth Care, and Hunger, that draw considerable meeting participation.
 7. West Hills Friends have been flexible on worship styles, drawing on a variety of different musical forms. In music ministry, as in other areas of ministry, leadership is passed around.
 8. West Hills Friends have been resilient and resourceful in confronting significant challenges, including the sudden and unexpected death of the son of Marshall and Eileen Henley. Another challenge, an ongoing one, has been a leading in welcoming and affirming LGBTQ Friends that has put them at such odds with their Yearly Meeting that the Yearly Meeting Elders have written a letter that “releases” (or

- expels) them. They have maintained their congregational unity, despite the pain and suffering that Friends have gone through, and have risen to meet their challenges.
9. Their humor. This is recognized as an essential element of their congregational life. And in the experience of this research team, they practiced what they preached! They laughed long and hard together, with each other.
 10. Their openness to the Spirit. They incorporate a significant period of silence in their worship services, and Friends often rise to share how the Spirit is leading them during this open period of worship. This connects with an important strand of Quaker tradition going back to the 17th century. In general, they appear to be aware of, and appreciative of, their Quaker tradition and heritage (which has developed a number of varying features across the centuries), but they are also willing to be critical of strands of this tradition when the necessity arises. In those instances, they have shown courage and forthrightness.

Endnotes

¹ It retained that affiliation until 2015, at which time it was released, or expelled, from Northwest Yearly Meeting, as a result of a Yearly Meeting Elders' decision which arose from a several year process initiated by concerns in the Yearly Meeting about West Hills' welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ persons. That release was subsequently appealed; the Yearly Meeting has not yet come to a sense of the meeting as to how to act on that appeal; so the current status of West Hills in relation to the Yearly Meeting has not been resolved. These events, and their yearly meeting affiliation consequently being in flux, were not the focus of our interviews with West Hills Friends; instead, we were asking them as to why and how they became a creative, healthy, innovative and thriving congregation. But the series of events that led to their "release" from the Yearly Meeting has been adequately covered elsewhere. See Stephen W. Angell, "George Fox University and West Hills Friends: Controversy and Conflict in Northwest Yearly Meeting," *Quaker Theology* 27 (Summer-Fall 2015): 9-53. <http://quakertheology.org/QT-27.html#controversy-conflict> (accessed Oct. 12, 2016); Stephen W. Angell, "LGBTs and Western Evangelical Quakers: A Reflection" and "'Shattering' Quakerism in the Northwest – Continued," A

Friendly Letter, Nov. 4, 2015 <http://afriendlyletter.com/shattering-quakerism-in-the-northwest-continued/> (accessed Oct. 12, 2016).

² This was an important ideal for a former Earlham faculty member, D. Elton Trueblood. He based it on Ephesians 4:11-12: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” “The Paradox of the Quaker Ministry,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 8 (1962): 12-13.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and his Boy* (Geoffrey Bles, 1954). This book was the fifth in the seven-volume Chronicles of Narnia.