

GEORGE EDWARD OTTO 1903 – 1996
A MEMORIAL MINUTE

In a traditional memorial minute there are three basic parts: (1) a biographical sketch of the deceased friend, (2) a recital of his or her interests and achievements, and, (3) anecdotal references to those things that are eternal that keep that person forever in our memory. For George Otto, however, there is another dimension that must be recorded, for he continues to be a living and vital spiritual force in Newtown Meeting.

From the founding of Newtown Meeting nearly 200 years ago to this date there has been a virtual parade of men and women of extraordinary spiritual gifts, whose insights, talents and sense of commitment have enriched the Meeting and the surrounding community. The vision of Edward Hicks as reflected in his ministry and in his art depicting the Peaceable Kingdom is still our vision. The first woman doctor in Newtown, Dr. Lettie Smith, had a concern for the elderly. This led to the founding of the Friends Boarding Home. The welfare of others is still our concern. During the first fifty years of this century, with the blending of Newtown Quakers and the faculty of the newly opened George School, a remarkable faith community grew and thrived in spite of a period of severe economic depression and social despair sandwiched between two world wars. Into this community George Otto and his family moved in decade of the 1940's.

George was born in 1903 in Baltimore, Md., the son of John George Edward Otto and Mollie Olivia Simpson Otto. He was educated in the Baltimore Public schools and the McDonogh School, graduated from Pennsylvania State University and took post-graduate courses at Yale University. In 1940, together with Robert C. Crowell, he founded Penn Valley Constructors and began building custom homes in eastern Bucks County. It was as a home builder in 1955 that he became a pioneer in the field of integrated housing, Greenbelt Knoll and Concord Park being but two examples of this effort. For this work he received the Fellowship Award from the Philadelphia Fellowship Commission in 1955.

The family that George brought into Newtown Meeting included his wife Ella, (who survives him, and who was his most ardent supporter), and five children: a daughter, Olivia Otto Johnston Casement, and four sons: Dr. Ralph Newlin Otto, Richard E. Otto, Robert S. Otto, and Jonathan E. Otto. Later, there would be added nine grandchildren and one great grandchild.

In addition to the committee work of Newtown Meeting, George took part in many Quaker organizations and activities. He served at many levels of the Religious Society of Friends in a variety of capacities. These included committees of Bucks Quarterly Meeting, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Friends General Conference, and, the Friends World Committee for Consultation. The Newtown community provided other outlets for his concerns. He was a founding member of Newtown Rotary Club, served on the Newtown Community Welfare Council, was president of United Way of Bucks County, and belonged to numerous other civic organizations.

From all of the foregoing we gain some insight into the scope of George's interests and concerns. Upon closer inspection, however, we see evidence of wider and deeper dimensions of a life guided by the spirit, a life that was rightly ordered and God led. His conviction that Edward Hicks' vision of the Peaceable Kingdom was attainable

was brought closer to reality by his work in the field of integrated housing and race relations. His concern over the environment in which Newtown Friends worshipped and nurtured each other resulted in the building of a two-story addition to the meetinghouse. Besides providing needed classrooms for first day school, this made space available for children to use without disrupting the silence of worship. A concern for the education and nurturing of children found him leading the effort to establish and build Newtown Friends School. Finally, the needs of aging and infirm Friends brought about his early involvement in the founding of Chandler Hall and Pennswood Village. He played an active role in these organizations for many years.

Institutions are evidence of the spiritual presence within that is the source of the inspiration and energy that leads to their becoming reality. We are inspired and energized by worship. The meeting for worship was central to George and his vocal ministry, inspired by worship, continues as a living presence with us. Many present members of Newtown Meeting have never experienced sharing worship with him. They have not been witness to the cheerful and gentle eloquence with which he described the glorious workings of God in our lives, and how our gathering together in worship enriches us all. The words and phrases that were uniquely his still surface from time to time, without attribution. For those who recognize them there is an inward smile, and for those who do not, there is enrichment nevertheless. Those who have chosen to become a part of this faith community have done so because to them it represents a spiritual haven where they may seek out and experience God and share that experience with others who are like-minded. Without the foundation put in place by George and those who preceded him there would be no such haven. Without their living spirit the spiritual fabric that shelters and nurtures our lives would be but ornamentation. The evolutionary process continues because God's work is never done and we are involved in it. We are grateful to God that we are enriched, inspired and encouraged by the life of our friend George Otto.