The Quaker Tapestry
January 9 -29, 1994

The Quaker Tapestry exhibit showcased a series of 77 crewel embroidery panels that celebrate Quaker insights and ideals, which was conceived of and started in 1981 by an eleven-year old boy and his First Day School teacher, Anne Wynn-Wilson of Taunton, England. The two were working on a series of drawings illustrating the roots of Quakerism, to brighten up their drab study room. The young boy knew his teacher was a master embroiderer and asked, "Can't we do this in embroidery?", and thus the project was born.

After the first panel was completed, Wynn-Wilson realized she & Jonathan could not possibly do the rest alone, but it might be accomplished with the help of others. Support was gained from the Yearly Meeting and a committee was formed to share the responsibility for choosing the subjects of future panels and to give stylistic approval for the submitted designs. Growing from this seed into a project of immense proportions, the tapestry took more than ten years to complete. Over 300 full time workers and 4,000 participants in ten countries, ranging in age from four to ninety-six, eventually contributed to the creative effort.

Knowing that many people of varying abilities would be involved, Anne Wynn-Wilson sought to keep the techniques very simple. Inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry, (the 11th century embroidery that tells the story of the Norman Conquest), she selected four basic, ancient stitches - the stem, split, knot, and chain, and a method of laying threads known as Bayeux Point. Each of these stitches is easy to learn, yet they can also be used in an expressive manner by more experienced embroiderers. A new stitch, combining stem and split stitches, was invented by Wynn-Wilson especially for the lettering. It is now known as the Quaker Stitch.

Each of the 21 x 25 inch panels communicate important Quaker ideals such as simplicity, truth, relief of suffering, and ecology. Not only do they teach about Quaker history, they celebrate the spiritual insights that continue to guide the Society of Friends today. Each panel depicts the essence of a story: incidents from the lives of well-known Quakers such as George Fox, John Woolman, Elizabeth Fry, Stephen Grellet, as well as less-famous Quaker scientists, botanists, and business people.
The Tapestry has served as an important outreach tool both through the process of creating it and also through subsequent exhibitions. Although widely exhibited in England, this was the first and only North American tour of the Tapestry. In addition to the exhibition at Guilford's art gallery, where close to 2000 visitors came to see it, the Tapestry was shown at Swarthmore College, Philadelphia, PA; George Fox College, Newberg, OR; St. Peter's Lutheran Church, New York, NY; and at Earlham College in Richmond, IN. As was expected, large numbers of Friends came to see the show, but also a surprising number of embroidery groups came from near and far to see the masterful craftsmanship.
The exhibition at Guilford served as the initial event in the Friends Vision 400 Tercentenary Celebration, and it was co-sponsored by the North Carolina Yearly Meeting Tercentenary Celebrations Committee. A hard-working and enthusiastic Quaker Tapestry Exhibit committee, clerked by Helen Parker and Avis Rees, and consisting of Joan Poole, Judith Harvey, Jeanne Gordh, Phyllis Gibbs and Terry Hammond, worked for more than one year preparing for the event. In addition, more than 50 volunteers from the local community served as stewards to the exhibit, answering visitors' questions, and protecting the tapestries from harm.

The legacy of the Quaker Tapestry continues, although the British project has been completed and will be permanently housed in an 18th century meeting house in Kendal, England. A North American Tapestry Project has begun, and two panels from it were included in Guilford¹s display. Ruth Hall Brooks, of Pennsville, NJ is clerk of the North American Tapestry Project. She visited Guilford for the first two weeks of the exhibit, demonstrating stitching techniques and sharing her story-telling skills on a daily basis. Such enthusiasm was generated by the beautiful and inspirational embroideries that a group, formed by Bill Rogers and lead by Jeanne Gordh, has decided to produce a panel from this area for the North American Tapestry.