

## Talking about Our Faith with Each Other

“This I knew experimentally...”

### Quakerism as an adventure in direct, unmediated, ongoing communal guidance by Spirit

Three models by which God/Spirit’s guidance is passed to a faith community:

Hierarchical revelation	Revelation via scripture	Communal discernment
God ↓ Pope ↓ Archbishop ↓ Bishop ↓ Priest ↓ Deacon ↓ Laity	God ↓ Scriptural writer ↓ Scriptural texts ↓ Texts are edited/selected by church, synods, rabbinic councils, etc. ↓ Faith leader interprets ↓ Laity	Spirit-guided community decisions ↑ clerk expresses sense of meeting ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑ (provisional sharing during mtg for business) “gathered” meeting for worship ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑ (spirit-led vocal ministry) Friend   Friend   Friend   Friend   Friend   Friend A   B   C   D   E   F ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑   ↑ (Spirit’s voice within individual hearts) God / Spirit / Inward Light

**Direct revelation.** Friends believe that each person has access to direct guidance from God in the present time.

- **When (if ever) have you experienced Spirit touching you / speaking to you directly?**
- **Was this a comforting experience or a disturbing one?**
- **What verbs would you use to describe your experience of God guiding your life?**

**“Universal priesthood”.** Friends believe that everyone has access to this experience - male & female, rich & poor, educated & uneducated. It is not restricted to an ordained priesthood or to those with formal religious training. Early Friends felt that the “Seed” (inward presence of God) acted even in the lives of those like Muslims or Native Americans who had no knowledge of Jesus or the Bible.

- **To what extent do you feel this idea of the direct guidance by Spirit is similar to or different from practice at the heart of other faiths?**

**Communal guidance.** Friends traditionally have believed that this guidance is not primarily to individuals but rather to the community (even if that guidance is mediated through individuals).

- **Do you feel the emphasis is too heavy on individual truth among Friends today? Or too heavy on corporate (group) guidance?**
- **If this direct guidance by God is at the heart of Quaker practice (Meeting for Worship, Mtg for Business, our “testimonies”), do you see this as being true in your experience of Quaker practice in your meeting? In yearly meeting?**

## Deepening Our Shared Worship

“When I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life.” - Robert Barclay (1649-90)

What does it mean to say a meeting for worship is “gathered” or “covered”?

- **What moves you most deeply in meetings for worship in your meeting?**
- **What is most challenging for you?**

“And this is the manner of their worship. They are to wait upon the Lord, to meet in the silence of the flesh, and to watch for the stirring of his life, and the breakings forth of his power amongst them. And in the breakings forth of that power they may pray, speak, exhort, rebuke, sing, or mourn, and so on, according as the spirit teaches, requires, and gives utterance.”

- Isaac Pennington 1681

- **Have you ever felt “power breaking forth” during worship?**

“Is the vocal ministry exercised under the divine leading of the Holy Spirit without pre-arrangement and in the simplicity and sincerity of truth?”

- *Faith and Practice of Pacific Yearly Meeting* (1985)

“The first that enters into the place of your meeting...turn in thy mind to the light, and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord, and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn in to the same light, and wait in the spirit. And so all the rest coming in, in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light... Those who are brought to a pure still waiting upon God in the spirit, are come nearer to the Lord than words are; for God is a spirit, and in the spirit is he worshiped... In such a meeting there will be an unwillingness to part asunder, being ready to say in yourselves, it is good to be here.” - Alexander Parker, 1660

### Evoking questions:

- **What practices do we use to enter into worship here at our Meeting?**
- **How does the meeting help new attenders and experienced members deepen their ability to enter into the silence?**
- **Do you feel the messages in your meeting are often “led by Spirit”?**

Factors that can affect the quality and depth of a meeting's worship:

1. Meeting “culture” (attitudes, values)
2. Preparation during the week
3. How Friends move / enter into worship
4. Those practicing a ministry of “holding” the worship
5. Vocal ministry (speaking in meeting)
6. Spaciousness
7. The “Door Beyond”

## Open Hearted Search for Unity (Corporate Discernment)

- **What is your experience of meetings for business?**
- **In what ways do you feel it meets the ideal Quaker vision of listening together to spirit - or fails to?**

“Wait. Wait. Wait in the stillness.

Wait. Wait. Let the gathering unite.

Wait. Wait. Wait in the silence.

Wait with the children of the Light.

Come gently to worlds that are new

Surrender yourself and be still:

Abandon your wisdom and will

To die in the silence in you.” From: *The Fire & the Hammer* by Tony Biggins & Alec Davidson

This a fragile enterprise. It can deteriorate into gridlock, inefficiency, “tyranny of the articulate” and even schism. Some of the components necessary for success include:

1. Again, the meeting “culture” around this
2. Preparation of agenda and items
3. Expectant waiting upon God
4. How statements are framed / presented (“tone”)
5. Willingness to “let go”
6. A skilled and assertive clerk
7. Eldership (those “holding” the process)
8. Patience and a sense of confidence

### Evoking questions:

- **What makes it hard for you to let go of your own sense of what is right and trust the group to act rightly? What barriers do you recognize in yourself to this happening?**
- **How can each person present contribute to the ability of the group to move into unity?**
- **How could the meeting nurture a more faithful process of shared decision-making?**

## Nurturing Gifts in One Another (Eldership)

Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are different ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different results, but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the benefit of all... It is one and the same Spirit, distributing as God decides to each person, who produces all these things. For just as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body—though many—are one body, so is Christ. (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7, 11-12)

- **What are some the gifts that you bring to this community?**
- **What do you really appreciate about what others are doing / living into?**

“Eldership” or “eldering” is an old-fashioned Quaker word that refers to several things:

1. Helping others and the meeting recognize, name, and nurture the growth of spiritual gifts that others bring to the meeting
2. Using silent prayer to help others to be able to listen better and respond to the voice of Spirit within them in meetings for worship and meetings for business.
3. Assisting others to remain true to the leadings they have received and the gifts that others have helped them name - and to hold them accountable in exercising these gifts for the good of the meeting community and the world

“Friends' concept of eldership focuses on the spiritual health, the interior Way to and with God, of individuals and faith communities. Elders have gifts of spiritual discernment and nurture, which are strengthened by learning, practice, and collective discernment with other seasoned members of the meeting. Their means is *prayerful listening*, deep listening to what is being said by another, by others, or within gatherings for worship, business, clearness, etc. where the intention is to seek the Will of God. Whereas the vocal minister gives birth to a message from God, the elder seeks to maintain the right conditions for birth.”

- Katharine Jacobsen “Eldership as a Spiritual Gift”

Gifts of eldership are often hidden from view or unrecognized as compared to other more dramatic, more visible gifts.

### Evoking questions:

- **Do you have a sense as a meeting that there are Friends who carry special gifts of recognizing, supporting and upholding the gifts of others - or of supporting and upholding what happens in meeting for worship and meeting for business?**
- **Is there a value to recognizing and supporting those who have such gifts?**
- **How can we be of use to each other more broadly in helping each other live out the gifts that we all bring to the meeting and the world?**
- **How can *all* of us help to “hold” worship and meetings for business (helping to call forth spirit-led messages during worship and a movement of the spirit towards unity in our decisions)?**

## **Meeting as “Beloved Community”**

ways to increase our capacity to share with each other  
in mutual trust, vulnerability, accountability, & love

- To what extent do you feel Friends in your meeting share with each other about their faith, their struggle, their hopes and dreams?
- Do you feel your meeting is a safe place to open up about key issues in your life?
- What contributes to or undermines the capacity for vulnerability with each other?
- To what extent do you feel Friends are able to hold each other mutually accountable for being faithful to Spirit in their lives - in a spirit of love?

### **Attending to Spirit: an exercise**

1. Both of you take a few minutes silently to choose a personal question you are pondering - school, job, relationship, political action, etc.
2. Choose one person to be a focus person and the other to be a support person  
(in a little bit you will switch roles)
3. The focus person take 5 minutes to talk about the question you are pondering - the support person just listens without saying anything.
4. Then the support person takes 5 minutes to ask several of the evoking questions. The focus person can just listen or can take notes or respond as you wish.
5. Then we will switch roles.

### **Evoking questions:**

- **How is God working with you in this? What are you learning?**
- **What fears are coming up? What resistance are you experiencing?**
- **What might allow you to trust and relax more into your effort to be faithful?**
- **What is the stretch or growing edge into which God is beckoning you right now?**
- **How willing are you to enter into the unknown?**
- **As you take a step in faithfulness, what opens up in you and outside of you?**

Note: The above “Attending to Spirit exercise” is based on ideas from Marcelle Martin

### **Further reading:**

Sandra Cronk (founder of the "School of the Spirit"), *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of the Faithful Quaker Community*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #297, 1991

Closing Minute from 2011 Quaker Spring Gathering: <https://quakerspring.org/about/resources/>

## **Hiding Our Lamps under a Bushel**

*Exploring barriers to sharing our faith with others*

**First Generation Friends.** The Quaker movement grew exponentially in the first generation or two. There was a realistic fear on the part of their opponents that all England would become Quaker. The first generation of Quakers never doubted:

1. That the faith they had discovered represented ultimate religious truth
2. That they were called to communicate their own religious experience widely to others and to encourage others to join the Quaker movement.

Although Quaker theology acknowledged the possibility that there were hidden people of faith in other faith communities whom God was working through, they aggressively asserted Quaker theology and testimonies and aggressively argued against other non-Quaker viewpoints on these issues.

Quakers were deeply involved in spreading their message via:

- Preaching in the streets and other public places
- Writing tracts, epistles, books, etc. to communicate what they were experiencing to non-Friends
- Using trials as opportunities for witness
- Visiting and writing to judges, magistrates, and rulers
- Talking to people one to one.

**The Quietist Period.** Although rapid growth was replaced by gradual decline, Quakers continued to promote their ideas to non-Friends at least until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Methods they used included:

- Holding public meetings for non-Friends when outstanding Quaker preachers came to the area
- Writing letters to newspapers
- Public criticism of other branches of Quakers as not being “true Friends”
- Distinctive dress and speech.

**Liberal Friends today.** Many pastoral Friends continue to engage in evangelism, especially in Third World countries, but most unprogrammed Friends have become very reluctant to share their beliefs with others. Friends are often glad to share their beliefs about political and economic issues (e.g. our “testimonies”) but not the spiritual foundation from which these social concerns spring. Some of the reasons include:

1. Pluralism – the belief that many paths are equally valid paths to God
2. Cultural emphases – secularism, individualism
3. Reactions against evangelical Christianity’s perceived judgmentalism
4. Personal discomfort with being too “pushy” towards others

### **Reflection questions**

- **If you are a convinced Friend, how did you find out about Quakerism?**
- **Over your entire life, roughly how many non-Friends (other than relatives or intimate friends) have you discussed your faith with?**
- **Do you like to share things that have meant a lot to you with others? (e.g. movies, ideas, places to visit)**
- **Have you ever been moved/helped by someone sharing about their beliefs with you? What is helpful or unhelpful about the way in which others have shared their beliefs with you?**
- **Do you think there are lots of people today who could benefit from Quakerism or only a few?**
- **What would happen if we had powerfully charismatic Quaker leaders (like Fox, Hooten, Fell, Fisher, the Penningtons, and Naylor) today carrying our message to the wider world?**

## Radical Witness (“Prophecy”)

“Prophets in the traditional sense are not merely people who foretell the future under spiritual inspiration. That is in fact quite accidental. They are above all 'witnesses'...who shoulder the 'burden' of vision that God lays upon them...Prophets are those who live in direct submission to the Holy Spirit in order that, by their lives, actions, and words, they may at all times be a sign of God in this human world.” - Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*

Prophets bring a counter-cultural vision of truth to the society around them, through

1. **Speaking & writing**
2. Prophetic **acts** - actions that challenge / contradict status quo
3. **Lifestyle** and structures of community

### Some historical examples of prophets:

Hebrew prophets

Jesus, early church communities, St Francis

Anabaptists (Amish, Mennonites, Brethren, Hutterites)

Early Quakers

John Woolman, Grimke Sisters, Lucretia Mott, Susan B Anthony, Alice Paul

Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Catholic Workers, Berrigan Brothers

- **What concerns weigh deeply on the hearts of Friends in your mtg today?**
- **How are you working to address these concerns as a meeting?**
- **Do you feel your meeting is responding to these issues in a prophetic way?**
- **How would prophetic witness differ from approaches being taken in your mtg now?**

“Hope, on one hand, is an absurdity too embarrassing to speak about, for it flies in the face of all those claims we have been told are facts. Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion; and one does that only at great political and existential risk. On the other hand, hope is subversive, for it limits the grandiose pretension of the present, daring to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is now called into question.”

— Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*

Dimensions of prophetic ministry:

1. Reminding (speaking truth)
2. Interpreting
3. Protesting
4. Advocating (on behalf of the persecuted, solidarity)
5. Envisioning
6. Embodying (the new order of things)

### Evoking Questions:

- **How might a prophetic approach rooted in faith differ from secular work on behalf of peace, racial justice, Earth care, and other concerns on Friends’ hearts?**
- **What would it take for Friends today to bring the prophetic authority, power, and resilience of past movements to our efforts to address the huge challenges us today?**

Barriers to radical faithfulness:

1. Fear (“The powers that be will destroy us if we really stand up.”)
2. Hubris (arrogance)
3. Judgmentalism (towards those who feel led differently)
4. Isolation (“I have to do it all myself.”)
5. Urgency
6. Depression / hopelessness (seeing too much of how bad it is)

The remedy for all of the above is love and trust in Spirit/God.