

Cultivating Spirit-led Worship

Robert Barclay (a 17th century Friend) described the impact of first attending meetings for 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.”

When meetings for worship become knit together like this in silence, they are often described as being “gathered” - or as “covered” meetings.

“Are meetings for worship held in expectant waiting for divine guidance?”

- 1985 *Faith & Practice of New England Yearly Meeting*

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

“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

“Do you come in a spirit of openness with heart and mind prepared for communion with God?” - 1985 *Faith & Practice of NEYM*

Entering into worship

- **What practices do you use to enter into worship here?**
- **How does the meeting help new attenders and experienced members deepen their ability to enter into the silence?**

Vocal Ministry. Speaking (or singing or praying) during worship was traditionally called “vocal ministry”. Early Friends felt strongly that vocal prayer or other verbal sharing during gatherings for worship should be spontaneous and directed by the Holy Spirit speaking in their hearts. They developed the practice of gathering in silent waiting, because they found this helped them to hear this “still small Voice” within them.

“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

A number of YMs have included a version of the following query in their books of discipline: “Is the vocal ministry exercised under the divine leading of the Holy Spirit without pre-arrangement and in the simplicity and sincerity of truth?” - 1983 *Faith & Practice of Pacific Yearly Meeting*

- **Do you feel the messages in your meeting generally spring from guidance of Spirit?**
- **What might the meeting do to help messages become more Spirit-led?**

Here are some of the factors that can affect the quality and depth of a meeting’s worship:

1. **Meeting Culture.** Do Meeting members have a living experiential sense of what a “gathered meeting” is? Of spirit-led vocal ministry? Does the Ministry & Worship committee feel empowered to take active responsibility for the quality of worship? What activities does the Meeting engage in that deepen the quality of shared worship?
2. **Spiritual Disciplines.** Do meeting families/members engage in spiritual practices (bible study, personal meditation, prayer, 12 step work, etc.) during the week? Do meeting members share about these practices with each other?
3. **Preparing the ground** (in ourselves). How do the lifestyle, activities, and use of media in our daily lives impact our ability to enter into deeply “held” worship together on Sunday morning? (Thich Nhat Hanh refers to this as the “diet” we consume.)
4. **How Friends move into worship.** How does what you do on Sunday morning and as you enter worship impact your ability to enter into a deep communion with God and others in meeting? How do you feel Meeting practices help or hinder this process of centering down? (greeters, handling of latecomers, timing of children being in meeting, physical layout, some Friends beginning to “hold” the worship space in silent prayer before most Friends enter, etc.)
5. **Eldership.** Have you noticed that worship tends to go deeper when certain Friends are present? Do some Friends seem to have special gifts of “holding” the worship space? Does the meeting do anything to nurture such gifts among the membership?
6. **Vocal ministry.** Is there a way the Ministry and Worship committee can prayerfully reflect on the extent to which ministry in the meeting is directed by the spirit without becoming involved in judgmentalism towards individual offerings? How does the meeting address a persistent personal pattern of ministry that deviates from this goal? How does it support and nurture those who seem gifted in giving messages that seem to spring from Spirit?
7. **The Door Beyond.** How does meeting draw to a close? What is the impact of introductions, announcements, or forms of sharing such as reading and addressing queries, “after thoughts”, “joys & sorrows” or “holding in the light” at close of meeting? How does Meeting for Worship spill over into the life of the meeting and the lives of its members throughout the week?

Further reading: Bill Taber: *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship* (PH pamphlet #30)
“Experiences of Worship and the ‘Gathered Meeting’ ” (a threshing session at Quaker Spring in 2012) <http://quakerspring.org/about/resources/other-documents/>