



*Quaker Worship,  
Faith and Practice*

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*Cover illustration: Ashton Meeting House on the campus of Sandy Spring Friends School, Sandy Spring, Maryland.  
Illustration by John Weske.*

*The cover page sketch may be replaced with a sketch or photograph of your meetinghouse or meeting place.*

## *Silent Worship*

If you have never before attended an unprogrammed Friends (Quaker) meeting for worship, your first meeting may surprise you.

While all Quakers meet in worship to hear more clearly God's "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12), Friends in the unprogrammed Quaker tradition base our worship entirely on expectant waiting. Friends take the Psalmist's advice literally: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

Unprogrammed Quakers have a style of worship that is unlike most worship traditions. Friends meet in plain, unadorned rooms because we have found that, in such spaces, we are less distracted from hearing that still small voice. There are no pulpits in our meeting rooms because Friends minister to each other. Our benches or chairs face each other because we are all equal before God. There are no prearranged prayers, readings, sermons, hymns, music, or sacraments because Friends wait for God's leadings (guidance and direction) and power in our lives.

During worship, messages may come to any one of us. Friends have found that some of the messages we receive are intended to be shared in meeting for worship, while others may be for personal reflection or for sharing on another occasion. Friends value spoken messages that come from the heart and are prompted by

the Spirit, and we also value the silence that we share together. Quaker worship is not only about what supports and enlivens us individually, worship is also about what we bring to others in our Quaker communities and in our world.

Following a spoken message, we return to the silence to examine ourselves in the Light of that message. Meeting for worship ends when one Friend, designated in advance, shakes hands with his or her neighbors. Then everyone shakes hands. No two meetings are ever the same.

### *Faith and Practice*

Like our style of worship, unprogrammed Quaker theology also differs from other religions. Because creeds (statements of belief) could never fully represent all revelation and could limit or confine our perceptions of truth, unprogrammed Friends write no creeds. Instead, we write queries (probing questions) that help us reflect on our beliefs and actions, and regional Quaker groups record our common values and experiences in manuals entitled *Faith and Practice*. *Faith and Practice* is descriptive, not prescriptive, describing what we do, not what we intend to do.

The majority of Friends world-wide are programmed or semi-programmed and have some elements in their worship that resemble Protestant services. Programmed

or semi-programmed Friends usually include a time of silent worship in their services and may emphasize the biblical basis of Friend's teachings more frequently than unprogrammed Friends. Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) keeps our large variety of Friends in touch with each other and provides sources of information on our diversity, our unity, and our opportunities to collaborate on shared concerns.

Without creeds, unprogrammed Friends have become more diverse in our beliefs about God than are our programmed or semi-programmed Friends. Nonetheless, all Friends share the common experience of God's presence within and among us, which has led us to realize that there is that of God (something of the Divine) in everyone. This realization is central to Quakerism. It is confirmed in Friends testimonies (our witness to the world), in the Bible (e.g. Ge 1:26, Hag 2:5, Jn 17:20-21), and in our personal experiences.

That of God within is referred to by Quakers with such terms as "the Christ Within," "the Inward Light," and "the Seed of Truth."

As all Friends have attempted to respond to that of God within, some common values have arisen that unite us.

### *Our Peace Testimony*

Friends experience life as holy. Because we recognize that there is that of God in everyone, Friends

try to avoid violence. We have found that when we hurt others, we also harm ourselves, denying that of God within. Therefore, Friends are concerned for both the victims of violence and for those being violent. With God's guidance, we try to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts and differences, to help others through service and the promotion of social and economic justice, to be kind in daily living, and to support each other's search for that of God within.

Just as we honor that of God within us, we also honor that of God around us. Friends, therefore, work to protect our environment, to share resources equitably among all people, and to protect our Earth for posterity.

### *Equality*

Friends experience of that of God within has led us to realize that God's guiding presence is universal: anyone anywhere can experience God directly. Friends are convinced that Quakerism is just one way to know God and that authentic expressions of God's leadings are also found in all major world religions. Many Friends study world religions for inspiration and insights, and we encourage our First Day School (Sunday School) classes to visit other worship services as a part of their religious education.

Because the experience of God is universal, Friends are convinced that God's presence is not the purview of

one gender or ethnicity. Quakers were the first religious group to acknowledge the equality of men and women before God. Since our beginnings in the mid-1600s, both Quaker women and men have shared equally in the work of Friends, and Quaker schools have educated both girls and boys. More slowly, Friends came to recognize the evils of slavery and discrimination and, over time, took the forefront in the work of abolition, becoming leaders in the modern civil rights movement. More recently, Friends have become aware of the importance of welcoming people of all sexual persuasions into community.

### *Continuing Revelation*

Because Friends recognize that there is that of God in everyone, Friends appreciate that anyone at any time may express God's leadings. Therefore, revelations (messages from God) are continuing (on-going). Friends affirm that God is continuously faithful. On those occasions when we do not sense God's presence, we suspect that our lack of attention is the cause. Similarly, Friends affirm that God inspired the writing of the Bible and other sacred literature and is still inspiring us.

Although we are not always receptive, God continues to reveal Divine guidance and unchanging

truth to all of us today, as in the past. Although we will never fully perceive God's truth, seeking it is the purpose of our worship.

### *Simplicity and Integrity*

In our effort to be receptive to God's truth, we have found that simplicity and integrity are essential. For Friends, simplicity is putting God first in one's life. Simplicity requires clear priorities and often inspires plainness and lack of clutter. Simplicity persuades one to affirm, not to flatter or overplay words or emotions, and to avoid extravagance and paraphernalia. Simplicity requires integrity, which is honesty in all dealings, telling the truth on all occasions, and consistent adherence to one's values. Simplicity and integrity have much in common: just as simplicity avoids cluttering one's environment, integrity avoids complicating one's relationships.

### *Diversity*

As with simplicity and integrity, Friends have found that diversity aids us in our search for truth. While invigorating, Quaker diversity is rarely easy. The differing opinions and beliefs of individual Friends can be challenging.



Although Friends have our historic roots in Christianity, some Friends do not consider themselves to be Christians. Moreover, those Friends who are Christians may have differing definitions of Christianity. We have unitarian and trinitarian Friends and evangelical and nonevangelical Friends. Some Friends attend other religious services as well as meetings for worship, some consider themselves to have more than one religious identity, and some are non-theists (not knowing or believing that there is a Divine Presence in the universe).

Nonetheless, Friends support for theological diversity is critical in our search for truth.

### *The Search for Truth*

Simplicity, integrity, equality, and diversity bring us closer to the truth, and truth is of such importance to us that our original name was “The Religious Society of the Friends of Truth.” The reference to “Friends” in our name comes from the Bible (Jn 15:15). Our nick-name, “Quakers” was originally a derogatory term that we adopted after a judge sentenced a Friend while referring to his quaking when overpowered by the Spirit.

The attempt to be truthful on all occasions inspired George Fox, one of our founders, to refuse to swear an oath in court. Fox maintained that swearing oaths to tell the truth on one occasion implies that there are other

occasions when one does not tell the truth. He also adhered to the biblical admonition against swearing (Mt 5:34–37). In courts today, Friends affirm that they tell the truth.

A very important consequence of Friends search for truth is that scientific discoveries do not tend to challenge the basis of our faith. Like the scientific method, Quaker faith and practice rely upon experience as our guide. We come to know truth experientially. The search for truth is more important to us than the maintenance of beliefs, and so we try to remain open to new approaches to truth.

To help us in our search for truth, we bring our personal revelations to our communities for discernment and clearness. Friends may ask their meetings for a clearness committee to help discern life decisions, such as marriage or changing jobs. Clearness committees are small groups of Friends who, by asking open-ended questions of the Friend seeking clearness, help that Friend discern God's leadings and a direction going forward.

### *Quaker Process of Decision Making*

Similarly, in our *corporate* search for truth, Friends use the worshipful Quaker process of decision making, a process for finding unity in all decisions that affect our communities. For Friends, unity is not usually

unanimity, which is agreement without dissent. Unity is more often agreement that acknowledges dissent, staying together through differences, and moving forward with guidance from our common values. The importance of finding unity in community is established in the New Testament (Jn 17:20-21) and was a value inherited from our Hebrew Scriptures (Ps 133:1).

To help achieve unity in meetings for business, a member of the meeting is appointed as clerk to listen for “the sense of the meeting.” Finding the sense of the meeting is a religious and spiritual process in which Friends seek God’s guidance in each situation. When the clerk has discerned the sense of the meeting, the recording clerk composes a minute that Friends agree with or modify. Achieving unity sometimes means that, occasionally, out of respect for the wisdom of the community, one or more dissenting members may “stand aside.”

Standing aside has become a valuable practice in which one allows a decision to go forward with which one is not entirely comfortable but for which one has no *moral* misgivings. On the other hand, the community knows that it must listen carefully to heartfelt dissent, as God’s leadings may come through any one of us at any time. For Friends, staying together despite differences is an important aspect of community, and we realize that the more differing opinions we consider, the more closely we may come to the truth.

In our search for truth, we often find that “way opens” (situations change or circumstances develop) enabling us to find the direction in which God is leading us. As we move in that direction, specific steps forward, which were not previously known to us, become apparent. If way does not open, we question if we have correctly understood our leadings.

### *Our Witness to the World*

Despite our diversity, our common values ensure that we can work, worship, and share together in community. When we do, our values become our testimonies to the world. Friends testimonies on truth, peace, equality, simplicity, integrity, diversity, stewardship, and community, have evolved over time and are the outward expressions of Friends attempts to turn our faith into practice. Not only do we expect that we can live Divinely inspired lives, we also expect that, with God’s power and guidance, we can attain and sustain social justice and peace on Earth.

Although we do not always succeed in living our testimonies, we continue to try to do so. As we do, our meetings for worship and business and our daily lives bear witness to our common values:

- life is holy;
- God’s inward presence is available to everyone;
- revelation is continuous;

- simplicity, integrity, diversity, stewardship, and community are essential in the search for truth;
- seeking truth and unity are goals in Quaker worship and business;
- and way opens to advance peace and justice.

These Quaker values grow out of our realization that there is that of God in everyone.

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