

#1 - Exploring Our Quaker Faith with Each Other

“This I knew experimentally...”

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

Direct revelation: Each has access to direct guidance from Christ in this present time.

“The Seed, or Grace of God, is small in its first Appearance, even as the Morning Light; but as it is given Heed to, and obeyed, it will increase in Brightness, till it shine in the Soul, like the Sun in the Firmament at its Noon-day Height.” - Elizabeth Bathurst, 1655-1685

“Art thou in darkness? mind it not, for if thou do it will fill thee more, but stand still and act not, and wait in patience till light arise out of darkness to lead thee.” - James Nayler, 1616-1660

“Sweet is this state, though low: for in it I receive my daily bread, which is given of the Lord; for I cannot live to him, but as he breathe the breath of life upon me every moment.” - Mary Penington, 1623-82

“I declared Truth amongst them, and directed them to the light of Christ in them; testifying unto them that God was come to teach His people Himself, whether they would hear or forbear...Therefore I exhorted the people to come off all these things, and directed them to the spirit and grace of God in themselves, and to the light of Jesus in their own hearts, that they might come to know Christ, their free Teacher... - George Fox's *Journal*

“The testimony of the Spirit is that alone by which the true knowledge of God hath been, is, and can be only revealed.” - Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*

- When (if ever) have you experienced Christ 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. Everyone has access to this experience. It is not restricted to an ordained priesthood or to those who receive formal religious training. Early Friends felt that the “Seed” (inward presence of God) acted in the lives of those like Muslims or Native Americans who had no formal knowledge about Jesus or the Bible.

“Oh you Rulers & Judges, do you think to overcome us by keeping [our teachers and ring leaders] in prison?. Nay, Christ is our teacher, and he cannot be removed into a corner... The Lord does not speak to us in an unknown tongue, but in our own language do we hear him perfectly, whose voice is better than life... We cannot own the teaching that is of this world, but that which cometh immediately from God, and that is pure and refresheth the soul...and it causeth us to meet together, to worship the Lord as we ought to do.”

- Esther Biddle *The Trumpet of the Lord Sounded Forth unto These Three Nations*, 1662

- How have you seen direct guidance by Christ's spirit at work in worship? In meetings for business? In your local church? At yearly meeting or in other settings?
- Have you seen Friends misuse or misunderstand the effort to seek such guidance?
- What happens when individuals or groups experience differing or even sharply conflicting discernment about how Christ is leading His people?
- Have you experienced other denominations or faith traditions seeking God's direct guidance in worship or corporate decision-making as Friends seek to do?

Further reading: Thomas Kelly: *A Testament of Devotion* (section on Inward Light).

Samuel Caldwell, *The Inward Light: “How Quakerism Unites Universalism & Christianity”*. (Phila. YM Relig. Ed. Comm., 1997) http://www.angelfire.com/dc/universalism/Inward_Light.html

Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*: 2nd propositions (on immediate revelation)

Colin Saxton “[Christ Has Come to Teach Us Himself](#)” (QuakerSpeak interview)

#2 Deepening Christ-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 the hearts of those gathered in worship become knit together like this, worship is sometimes described as being “gathered” - or as a “covered” meeting for worship.

- What moves you most deeply during worship in this church?
- 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

Entering into worship

- What practices do you use to enter into worship here?
- How does the church help new attenders and experienced members deepen their ability to enter deeply into worship with others?

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

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

Vocal Ministry. Traditionally Friends called speaking, singing, or praying during gatherings for worship “vocal ministry.” Early Friends felt strongly that preaching and spoken prayer during worship needed to be spontaneous and directed by Christ in the moment. They developed the practice of gathering in silent waiting prior to any spoken words, because they found this helped them to hear and pay heed to the “still small Voice” of Christ within.

“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 Penington 1681

Early Friends’ resistance to pre-planning of worship was a reaction against what was felt to be the absence of Divine direction of worship in the Anglican masses and Puritan worship at the time. During the 19th century many Friends meetings began to plan worship services in advance.

What practices within the church's life increase the likelihood that Christ's spirit will direct the preparation and planning by your church's worship leaders *and* fill the sermons, songs, readings, and spoken prayers offered during services?

- How do you prepare your heart to enter worship when you are not one of the designated worship leaders?
- Do you hold worship leaders in prayer as they prepare for and plan worship? As they pray, read from scripture, preach, or lead the church in song?
- When have you felt words spoken or sung as springing from Divine guidance?
- What else might the church do to help worship to be more consistently directed by and filled with Christ's living presence?

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

1. **Church culture** - Do members have a lived experiential sense of what "gathered worship" is? Of Christ-directed preaching and prayer? In what ways does the church's Ministry & Worship committee exercise responsibility for the quality of worship? What activities does the church engage in that deepen the quality of the worship we share together?
2. **Spiritual disciplines** - Do families/members engage in spiritual practices (bible study, personal prayer, etc.) during the week? Do church members share about these practices with each other?
3. **Preparing the ground** (in ourselves). How do the lifestyle, activities, and use of electronic media in our daily lives impact our ability to enter into deep Christ-filled worship on Sunday? "Do you come in a spirit of openness with heart and mind prepared for communion with God?" - 1985 *Faith & Practice of NEYM*
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 deep communion with Christ and others in church? How do you feel church practices help or hinder this process of movement into deep communion together? (greeters, handling of latecomers and children, physical layout, some Friends beginning to "hold" worship space in 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 church do anything to nurture such gifts among the members?
6. **Oversight** - How does the Ministry and Worship committee prayerfully consider the extent to which worship is guided and filled with Christ's spirit without becoming involved in judgmentalism?
7. **The "Door Beyond"** - How does worship draw to a close? What is the impact of introductions, announcements, intercessory prayer, fellowship after worship? How does Sunday worship spill over and connect to the life of the church and 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/>

#3 - The Search for Unity (Corporate Discernment)

Deepening our capacity to be led together by Christ during meetings for church business in an open-hearted search for unity

In addition to a unique approach to corporate worship, early Quakers developed a radically new way of making decisions together as a community. To succeed, this approach involves a willingness to trust each other deeply in the shared effort to discover what Christ is guiding the group into, letting go of one's own personal sense of what needs to happen in a search for unity - not just unity with *each other* but with the Divine Guide capable of guiding us as a church. What does it mean to listen together to each other and to this voice of Christ in our midst?

- What is your own experience of meetings for church business and committee mtgs?
- In what ways do you feel it does or doesn't meet the above ideal vision of this practice?

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. **A culture in the church** where members understand & are willing to enter into the group discernment.
 2. **Careful preparation of items** in advance of meetings for church business to sort out which items really need to come to the whole church for decisions. This makes it possible to move more slowly and prayerfully through those really important issues where decisions need to be reached by the church as a whole. Avoid reading reports that can be read earlier or later.
 3. **An atmosphere of expectant waiting** upon Spirit during meeting for business.
 4. **Presenting one's intuition “provisionally.”** This involves willingness in those present to share their personal sense of what Spirit is asking the group to do in a manner that avoids an “authoritative” tone - speaking with humility in a way that communicates honor and respect towards differing discernments of what is right.
 5. **Willingness to “let go”** once one has shared one's own sense of what is right, trusting to the wisdom of the group to either unite with this or to move in a different direction. (In most cases, speaking once should be sufficient to make one's intuition clear to the clerk and others.)
 6. **A skilled and assertive clerk** able to discern the “sense of the meeting” (ie. what God appears to be asking the group to do) through the different expressions from those present. This is a challenging and powerful form of spiritual leadership.
 7. **Eldership.** Some Friends may have special gifts of “holding” this process through silent prayer. Everyone present, however, can help to hold the process prayerfully in their hearts.
 8. **Patience and a sense of confidence** that the process can work well as intended.
- 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 to this happening do you recognize in yourself?
 - How can each person present contribute to the group's ability to move into unity?
 - How might the church nurture a more faithful process of shared decision-making?

Further reading: “The Four Pillars of Meeting for Business” by Deborah Humphries

http://www.inwardlight.org/four_pillars_of_meeting_for_business.html

Michael Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Part II, chaps 1, 2, 3, 5) – an in-depth study of Quaker business process by a Jesuit priest.

#4 - 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 of 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 church recognize, name, and nurture spiritual gifts that others bring to the congregation.
2. Using silent prayer to help others such as worship leaders and during church meetings for business to be able to listen better and respond to the voice of Christ.
3. Assisting others to remain true to the calls and 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 church 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.

- Do you have a sense as a church that there are Friends among you carrying special gifts of recognizing, supporting and upholding the gifts of others - or of supporting and upholding what happens in worship and business sessions?
- 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 call forth Christ-guided messages & spoken prayers during worship and movement towards unity in church business sessions)?

#5 - The Church as “Beloved Community”
Ways to increase our capacity to share with each other
in mutual trust, vulnerability, accountability, & love

We gathered seeking rest and refreshment in the Lord. It was a struggle to slow down, to let go and rest, but we were able to encourage one another, helped by the freedom from formal program and open to the leading of the Spirit in our schedule and activities. As we laid down our roles, responsibilities, and burdens, we were refreshed by God’s living water, sometimes in new and unexpected ways.

In our first session, we were invited by the words of Isaac Penington to give over our own willing, give over our own running, give over our own desiring to know or be anything... and sink down to the seed that God sows in our hearts. We sought to listen deeply, and to respond faithfully in allowing our time, words, and worship to be shaped by the Holy Spirit.

With the ground of our hearts thus prepared, we experienced the intimate presence of the Inward Teacher leading us, challenging us, opening us to share deeply with one another, and guiding us into new ways of living in Love, especially in and with our beloved meetings.

We were opened this week to a deeper understanding of Christ’s teaching that those who are “poor in spirit”—who know their need of God—are truly blessed. We learned in new ways how acknowledging our loneliness, brokenness, and need of God’s ever-present Love opens the door into wholeness, community, and authentic faithful living. Choosing to be vulnerable about our experiences, our wounds, and our need to mourn is a choice that leads to Life.

We feel a deep yearning to support one another in faithfulness, knowing that many stumbling blocks remain in our paths. We long to experience more fully the Love of God among us, both personally and as meeting communities, yet so often we hold back. We are called to remind one another of the vital dance of giving and receiving—that by allowing ourselves to be held or served, we offer the gift of service and care to others. **We face the truth that fear—of being seen and known, of being labeled or judged, of being thought of as weak or needy, of being abandoned—is a potent barrier to meeting each of these needs, but one that can be overcome as we humbly seek to be open to God’s grace. This begins with allowing ourselves to feel how deeply we are loved by God. As this happens, we are given the strength to stand and live in Love that casts out fear. This empowers us to speak fearlessly the truth that we receive.** *[emphasis added]*

All of these things are a journey we lived and walked together this week.

As our time drew to a close, we felt the wind of the Spirit moving through us, inviting and challenging us to be faithful to the recognition, care, and stewardship of the gifts among us, for the nourishment of our wider communities and our world. Seeds have been planted in this precious time. May they bear the fruit of 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 important, even tender 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 Christ in their lives - in a spirit of love?

Attending to Christ's work in another church member (an exercise)

1. Break into pairs.
2. Both take a few minutes silently to choose a personal question that you are pondering - a question about school, job, relationship, political action, etc.
3. Choose one of you to be the "focus person" first. The other will serve as a "support person." (In a little bit you will switch roles.)
4. Have the focus person take 5 minutes to talk about the question you are pondering - as the support person listens attentively in silence.
5. Then have the support person take 5 minutes to ask several of the "evoking questions" below. The focus person can just listen or can take notes or respond as you wish.
6. Then switch roles.

Evoking questions:

- How is Christ 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 to God?
- What is the stretch or growing edge into which Christ 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: This "Attending to Christ exercise" is based on the writings & work of 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
 Marcelle Martin, *A Guide to Faithfulness Groups*, Inner Light Books, 2019

#6 - Setting Our Lights on the Lampstand

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, early Friends forcefully asserted Quaker theology and testimonies and argued strongly against 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-19th 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.

Friends today. Many Friends continue to engage in evangelism, especially in Third World countries, but many Friends are reluctant to share their beliefs with non-Friends in their communities. Friends are often glad to share their beliefs about political and economic issues (often referred to as Quaker “testimonies”) but not the Quaker faith from which these “testimonies” 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. Reaction against overly judgmental Christian evangelism
4. Personal discomfort with being too “pushy” with others

Reflection questions

- If you are a “convinced” (first generation) Friend, how did you find out about Quakers?
- How often do you discuss your Quaker values and beliefs with others outside of your immediate circle of close friends and family?
- Do you like to share things that have meant a lot to you with others?
- Have you ever been moved/helped by someone sharing their core 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 many people today who could benefit from learning about or becoming involved in the Quaker church?
- Do you feel that we have spiritually empowered charismatic Friends leaders today (similar to first generation Friends such as Fox, Hooten, Fell, Fisher, the Penningtons, and Naylor)? What impact might Friends have on the larger world if we had more Friends able and willing to carry the Quaker message to the world around as happened in 17th century England and America?

#7 - Radical Faithfulness (“Prophetic witness”)

“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 message of truth to the society around them, through:

1. **Speaking & writing**
2. Prophetic **acts** - actions that challenge / contradict the status quo in the “world”
3. **Ways of living** and structures of community

Some historical examples of prophets:

Hebrew prophets

Jesus

Francis of Assisi

Anabaptists (Amish, Mennonites, Brethren, Hutterites)

Early Friends

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

Alice Paul, Gandhi, Catholic Workers, Martin Luther King Jr.

- What concerns weigh most deeply on the hearts of Friends in your church today?
- How are you working to address these concerns as a church?
- Do you feel your church is responding to these issues in a prophetic way?
- If not, how would a prophetic response be different than the approaches being taken 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)

- How does your commitment as a Christian to loving God and your neighbor inform your prophetic action?
- What would it take for Friends today to bring the prophetic authority, power, and resilience of earlier movements such as those above to efforts to address the enormous challenges facing our world today?
- Do we believe that we are capable of moving mountains - as Christ told us we could do?
- Is there any difference between work for justice that is explicitly rooted in faith from “secular” justice work?
Or, if we believe with Fox that the Divine Seed is over all, is there any truly secular aspect to the human world and the work we do in it?

Barriers to radical faithfulness:

- Which of the barriers below do you think are particular dangers for you personally?
For your church community?
1. Fear (“The powers that be will destroy us if we really stand up.”)
 2. Hubris/arrogance (“My way is the only right one.”)
 3. Isolation (“I have to do it all myself.”)
 4. Judgmentalism (towards those who are led differently)
 5. Urgency (“These changes need to happen now!”)
 6. Depression / hopelessness (being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem)

The remedy for all of the above is love and trust in Christ.