

# Recognizing Spiritual Gifts and Leadings

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All Friends are called into a ministry soon or later, whether public or private, in word or deed or silent prayer, of long duration or short.

Lloyd Lee Wilson, 1993

All Friends are called to minister to others, but not all are called to do so in the same way. Offering a vocal message during meeting for worship is the best-known form of Quaker ministry, but it is far from the only one. Ministry may involve caring for those who are ill, teaching First Day school, or even washing dishes after an event at the meeting house. These forms of ministry rarely call for formal recognition, but they serve to deepen the covenant community that is at the core of every Friends meeting.

Ministry is most effective when it takes place according to one's gifts and leadings. In Quaker parlance, a "gift" is a God-given ability that is intended to be used for spiritual purposes, while a "leading" is a call to action based on a Friend's sense that God has "led" her or him to take on a particular cause, for example pastoral care in a prison or hospital. Such leadings typically emerge as a result of prayerful consideration of a concern, and they often reflect the gifts of the person who is led to act on them.

In some cases, a gift or leading may call for special recognition and/or support from a Friend's home meeting. Historically, this has most often occurred when a meeting formally acknowledged that one of its members had a gift of spoken ministry and saw fit to "record" that ministry. Meetings have also "released" certain members to travel based on recognized leadings of those members. Early Quakers felt that they were called to support such members for the benefit of the entire Religious Society of Friends. While this practice occurs less frequently today, a number of Quaker meetings continue to formally recognize leadings, and some also record ministries.

## **Recognition of Leadings**

Monthly meetings are occasionally called upon to decide whether to formally recognize the leading of an individual Friend. Such recognition means that the meeting takes that leading under its care. An individual wishing to have the meeting take a leading under its care is subject to the meeting's processes of spiritual discernment, which normally involve Ministry and Counsel or a similar committee. As part of its discernment process, that committee might wish to ask that person questions such as the following:

- What is the nature of your leading? Do you have the gifts necessary to take it on?
- Why do you feel you are being called? Is this the right time for you to follow this leading?
- Are there aspects of your leading that you are still seeking to clarify?
- What are the challenges you will face? How will you handle those challenges?
- If the meeting formally recognizes your leading, how will that support you?

- How will following your leading impact your spiritual journey? How will it deepen the spiritual life of the meeting community?

While a committee undertakes discernment and provides recommendations about leadings, the meeting as a body is responsible for deciding whether to take a given leading under its care. Any meeting that chooses to do so should be prepared to provide aid to the “led” individual as necessary and appropriate. In turn, the individual whose leading has been formally recognized is expected to confer regularly with a support committee appointed by their meeting, and he/she should offer a report on their leading to the meeting on at least an annual basis.

### **Recorded Ministry**

The recording of ministers, once very popular among Friends, has become less prevalent over time. London Yearly Meeting, which originated the practice, discontinued it in 1924, and other yearly meetings subsequently followed suit. Illinois Yearly Meeting has not seen fit to make use of this practice since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the monthly meetings that comprise ILYM are welcome to consider doing so. Any monthly meeting that has not established a position on the recording of ministers is advised to undertake discernment as to whether to permit this practice. If the meeting decides that it is willing to record ministers, it should consider adopting formal procedures in order to be prepared if and when such situations arise. As with the recognition of leadings, those procedures will involve spiritual discernment of God’s will on the part of the meeting community.

The recording of a minister does not confer greater status or more privileges upon that Friend than any other. On the contrary, it involves significant responsibility, for the bearer should expect to be held to a high standard.

[W]e do believe and affirm that some are more particularly called to the work of the ministry, and therefore are fitted of the Lord for that purpose . . . and that . . . there is something more incumbent upon them in that respect than upon every common believer.

Robert Barclay, 1678

As with recognized leadings, recorded ministers should confer regularly, preferably in person, with a support committee appointed by their meeting, and should offer the meeting regular reports on their ministry.

### **Travel Minutes and Letters of Introduction**

If a recognized leading or recorded ministry involves travel outside of one’s home meeting, the meeting is expected to provide the individual in question with a “travel minute.” That minute takes the form of a brief letter, written and signed by the clerk of the meeting, documenting the meeting’s support and requesting “hosting” Friends to offer loving care to the visitor.

It is customary for travel minutes to be read aloud in the meeting that is being visited, usually directly after Meeting for Worship. The clerk or representative of the visited meeting

1 then endorses the travel minute, noting the date of the visit and offering a return greeting to the  
2 issuing meeting. The endorsement should attest to the faithfulness of the traveling Friend.

3 Travelers are expected to return their travel minute to their meeting when they return home.

4 Friends or regular attenders who plan to visit other Friends meetings are welcome to  
5 request a “letter of introduction” from their monthly meeting even if they are not doing so on the  
6 basis of a recognized leading or recorded ministry. That letter identifies its bearer as a member of  
7 a meeting community, extends greetings from that community to the one(s) they are visiting, and  
8 asks that “hosting” Friends cordially welcome the traveler.

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